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Prologue

Asahikawa has long winters. The snow really starts falling in mid-November, and remains on the sidewalk into the beginning of May. Since the winters stretch on for so long, Asahikawa citizens tend to “stock up”. It’s common to have a large refrigerator as well as a freezer, and the entrance of your house becomes a natural fridge when the temperature drops, so preservation isn’t an issue. So, doing a lot of shopping on the weekend is inevitable. Even though the parking lots at the supermarkets are huge, it can still be difficult to find a parking spot.

This Saturday, I’m at a large store in Nagayama, buying groceries and daily necessities with my mom. Although it’s bothersome, fresh rice is on sale, and salmon roe is cheap. Although it isn’t a luxury item in Hokkaido, salmon roe has been increasing in price in recent years. Even so, it doesn’t feel right to not have homemade salmon roe pickled in soy sauce on the dining table in fall and winter. In short, it’s salmon roe that has made me carry bags for my mom. Besides salmon roe, we also get a 30kg bag of rice, and ingredients for oden, which I end up carrying.

Since we had to park far away, I bring the cart over to the car and start loading everything into the backseat. I notice my mom isn’t here.

“Well! Long time no see. Thank you for always taking care of Shoutarou…”

I lift my head and look around after hearing that voice, and see Sakurako-san and gran pushing a similar cart a short distance away.

“No, no, I should be thanking you. The young master is always helping us.” My mom and gran greet each other. It seems Sakurako-san parked near us. What are the chances?

“Are you out shopping?”

Sakurako-san is dexterously pushing the cart with one hand, while using her other hand to support gran’s back. I rush over to Sakurako-san, and put her bags in her car.

“We’re heading to the hospital after this.”

“The hospital? Is something wrong?” I look at Sakurako-san, worried she got sick, but she’s pointing at gran. “Huh? Gran? Is something wrong?”

“No, no, it’s probably just because she’s getting older.”

I try to take some things off her hands, but she shakes her head and says, “don’t worry.”

“Her blood pressure is a bit high, and her knees hurt.” Sakurako-san says expressionlessly.

My mom seems to be concerned for gran. “If your blood is high now, it’ll probably raise even higher next season.”

Completely disregarding Sakurako-san, my mom starts having a conversation about blood pressure with gran. Sakurako-san has no interest in their conversation, so she returns the cart to the corral and gets into the car.

“Well, have a nice day.”

Gran gets into the car, but stops just before she closes the passenger side door. She turns to look at me. “That’s right… Young master, are you doing anything on Friday next week?”

“Huh? Well I’d usually be at school…”

“When school ends, could you please come by the house?”

“Oh… Sure. Is everything okay?” Aside from holidays, it’s unusual to be invited somewhere on a weekday.

“Naoe-sama and Ms. Chiyoda will also be there. We plan to have a party that evening.”

“A party?”

“You should go. It’s hard on gran to do everything alone. You better help out.” My mom hits my back.

Well, I might as well. I feel more like I was asked to help than invited. Still, I agree to go.

“Well, sorry to bother you.” I nod my head.

Gran closes her car door and smiles at me, saying, “I’ll be waiting!”

Actually, I wonder what they’re celebrating. Is it someone’s birthday? Now that I think about it, I don’t know when Sakurako-san’s birthday is.

Sakurako-san’s car starts up. As she drives past me, Sakurako-san faintly smiles. Her smile seems to say “see you later.” I wave at her. Of course, she turned back around so she didn’t see, but I’m glad she at least smiled.

I get into the car, exhausted from shopping. My mom says that we’re going to a nearby ramen shop for lunch. Even if it’s nothing fancy, going out to eat is still expensive, especially right after shopping. Still, I want ramen, so I keep quiet.

“Actually, mom… Do you have high blood pressure?” I ask my mom, after remembering her conversation with gran earlier.

“Only when it’s cold out.” Her expression is flat. “Well, when it’s cold out, your blood vessels constrict, so it’s easier for your blood pressure to get high. We’ve been trying to save energy this winter, right? The price of kerosene is rising, so heating gets expensive.” My mom laughs it off.

“Are you sure you aren’t having too much salt, or not exercising enough? Or maybe you’re stressed? They say that it’s better for you if you don’t drink your ramen broth.”

“Really? I don’t think I could handle that.”

“That’s right.”

It’s hard, but I’ve been trying not to drink my broth ever since I learned about all the salt and oil in it. My mom seems to have the same issue as me.

“Anyway, try to be a little careful. Make sure you remember to consider your blood pressure.” I say a bit angrily. My mom glances at me. “…What’s wrong?”

“Well, I never thought you’d tell me something like that!”

My mom laughs at me like I said something stupid. “Y-you shouldn’t have to worry about me! I’m fine! I’ll still live a normal life!”

I wonder if I’m worried about nothing. I don’t regret saying it, though. My mom laughs strangely at me.

“Besides, I can’t die until I get grandchildren.”

I guess everything will be fine. Ever since I met Sakurako-san, I’ve constantly been reminded that death is cruel.

“Quit it!”

However, my mom just keeps laughing, as if she doesn’t take my concerns seriously. I lean against the window and look out.

“It’s like a parent and child relationship at Kujo-san’s place, too.” The car starts to move again. Although we had been silent for a while, mom my suddenly speaks.

“Huh?”

“I always thought she just acted rudely, but she walks slower so she doesn’t leave gran behind. I guess Kujo-san is a good person.” She mutters “a long life…” and smiles.

Today’s lunch ended up not being ramen, but a healthy tororo soba, instead.

First Bone: What Sound Does a Cat Make?

Part 1

Since my grandma’s favourite fruit was apples, I’m also fond of them. They’re so shiny and crisp that when I have them, I can’t help but take a big bite. As gran instructed, I go to the orchard near the Asahiyama zoo with Sakurako-san and Hector. I sometimes visit this orchard with my mom. They have an annual owner service where you pay for a tree, they take care of it for a year, then you can harvest the fruit when it’s ready. I’ve mentioned it before… So I guess they decided to get one.

On this sunny October day, the Kujo tree is ready for harvest. Sakurako-san and I grab a basket and head for the tree, while Hector plays with Kalinka, the lively golden retriever that lives at the orchard. They’re tsugaru apples. I actually like apples that are a bit crisper, but seeing these bright red apples on the branches makes them look good, too.

“Can I have one?” I ask Sakurako-san. Just by lifting the fruit slightly, it pops right off the branch. She says that it’s fine, and starts climbing the ladder to harvest some.

The apple is big and heavy. Its skin is slightly damp. I polish it with my sleeve until it shines. When I bite into it, the juice drips all over my hand. It’s actually quite soft, but it still makes a sound when I bite it. The taste is sweet with a mild sourness, but best of all is the rich aroma.

“Is it good?” Sakurako-san asks, passing me some of the higher fruit.

“Yeah. It even smells great.”

It has a really strong scent and flavour. This orchard directly sells its produce, so I've had some fresh fruit before, but nothing as strong as this.

"The main component of an apple's scent is alcohol. There's also other things that are easily vaporized, like ester."

"Then the scent is just the liquid in the air?"

"Since you're human, autolysis begins from the moment of death. So, deterioration begins immediately after a fruit is harvested, too."

I thought comparing a fresh apple to a corpse would make me lose my appetite, but I've grown accustomed to it. Today, Sakurako-san is wearing a white knit sweater with verticals stripes, and boot cut jeans. She passes the apples down to me from the upper branches. Her forward-bent posture from standing on the step ladder and the spread cuff of her jeans charmingly emphasize her thighs. Every time she reaches up, her knit sweater highlights her chest, making it hard for me to focus on the apples.

"Um… High places are dangerous, I'll take over."

As expected of the forbidden fruit that lead Adam and Eve astray. I feel my ears turning red while Sakurako-san descends the ladder so we can switch jobs.

"Really?"

Sakurako-san looks upset for a moment, it seems that she was enjoying harvesting the apples, surprisingly. I also enjoy it. It's so satisfying to be able to easily harvest the fruit, and gradually fill the basket with such delicious food.

Before I know it, Sakurako-san is cutting up a small apple with her Victorinox knife, and eating it. She uses the blade of the knife to put the apple in her mouth, so I'm worried she might cut herself. She is used to cutting up animal corpses, though, so using sharp tools is her forte.

The harvest doesn't take very long. It only took 20 minutes for us to have two heaps of wonderful apples. I didn't count them, but there's easily at least 100.

"Gran will be happy with these."

"She likes apples."

"I didn't think we'd get this much."

"Ms. Shouko… That's right, you should bring her some, and take some to Yuriko's place, too." Looking down proudly at the freshly picked apples, Sakurako-san says,

"Yuriko…? You mean… Kougami?"

Sakurako-san nods. I'm surprised. I didn't expect her to use the first name of someone she isn't very close to like that.

Yuriko Kougami, my classmate. Since we became acquainted after discovering the body of her grandma who had gone missing, we now go to a café together a few times a month. Sometimes she invites me for tea. She had to give up on her dreams so she should take care of her grandpa and do the housework, so she carries a burden that she can't easily share with other people. I'm sure she wants to get rid of whatever is weighing on her heart. There isn't any special meaning behind it. However it does make me happy to be invited by a girl, and she's fun to talk to. Kougami is my close friend, but we aren't close enough for me to call her "Yuriko" without an honorific. I'm surprised that Sakurako-san feels like they have that level or friendship. Since when? I feel like an outcast.

“Let’s meet at the same tea shop as last time. Since she gave me that painting, I thought I should thank her. It’s a good painting.” Sakurako-san has no idea how I feel, so she continues like nothing happened.

Sakurako-san, who doesn’t like humans, is close enough to someone to use their first name without an honorific? As I’m thinking about it, I suddenly realize that she almost always refers to people without honorifics. She only uses honorifics for people she truly respects.

“Alright, then let’s thank them for the painting.” I laugh at my own stupid jealousy.

Now that I think about it, she did call me by my name once, but it wasn’t “Shoutarou”. What was it, again?

“Honestly, Kougami’s grandpa must have really loved painting.”

Sakurako-san smiles and nods. Painting used to be Kougami’s grandpa’s hobby, and his paintings seem to match Sakurako-san’s taste.

“Hector! It’s time to go home!”

Hector has run a short distance away. Sakurako-san calls out to her dog. Hector is smart, and immediately follows her commands.

“Honestly… aren’t you going to get scolded by gran for that?” I sigh and smile bitterly.

Hector is completely covered in dirt. Gran is definitely going to complain when we get back. Sakurako-san passes her apple core to him. He happily eats it and smiles. Sakurako-san and samoyeds both have the same devilish smile. I can’t resist his adorable smile, so I pet his head.

As I expected, I have to carry it all on my own until Sakurako-san takes the other handle. When we finally reach the car, Sakurako-san smiles. Her expression is proud, and somehow cute.

The entrance of the orchard sells jam made from apples, pears, and grapes. The nice woman at the stand lets us sample some sweet grape jam. It’s delicious, so I consider buying some for my mom sometime.

“We didn’t get many grapes this year, so this is the last of what we have.”

“Really?”

“It’s because of the raccoons. Tanuki only eat the fruit that’s lower down, but raccoons can climb the trees to eat it.” She sighs and says, “I can tell them apart from tanuki, but still.”

“Do we have many raccoons here?”

I’ve heard about the damage they do in the news, but that’s usually in warmer places, like Honshu. It’s a bit surprising to hear about them in Asahikawa.

“There’s been trouble with them in Furano and Biei, too. My acquaintance who owns a farm was complaining about it.”

“Really…”

“There’s been reports of damage for the last few years. They’re highly adaptable, and they can reproduce quickly. Even I’ve seen several wild raccoons.” Sakurako-san says. Of course, she means their bones.

Since they’re intelligent and have huge appetites, I’ve heard that they’re a growing problem for those working in agriculture. They look cute, so they were first brought to Japan as pets, but people started releasing them into the wild when they didn’t want it anymore. Even

though they cause so much damage, it's still hard to get rid of them. It's a difficult problem. Sakurako-san speaks happily about the characteristics of raccoon bones, but I miss most of it.

"Alright, let's take some to Sawa-san's place."

"Sawa-san?"

While buying beautiful, pale pink apple jam and a mountain of grapes, Sakurako-san says, "Gran's younger brother's grandchild. He works as an animal caretaker in Asahiyama."

"Is he the one that sometimes he helps with making specimens as the Asahiyama zoo?"

"That's right. Almost all the specimens at the Asahiyama zoo were made by him alone."

I finally understand. She's probably worked with him before. Sakurako-san is sometimes called in to help with things like that as an expert on bones.

"Come to think of it, I haven't been to Asahiyama in a while."

I haven't been since I was a kid, and I'm in high school now. Unfortunately, Asahiyama isn't close. It's not that I don't want to go, it's just that I somehow have the impression that it's always crowded, so it makes me not want to visit as much.

"I'm sure it's changed a lot since then. If you don't have any plans after this, want to go?" Perhaps she wants to show me the specimens there. She sounds so happy.

The words she said to me in the garden of the Kujo residence that time pass through my mind. "So we shouldn't see each other anymore." Those words feel like a stab through my chest. "Is it okay if I go, too?"

It's not that I don't want to go with her. Does she hate me? I start feeling anxious. Since she tried to completely reject me, she hasn't contacted me like she did before, but when we're together like this, it's the same as always. The same selfish, slightly ill-natured, bone loving Sakurako-san as always.

"…I've always wanted to hear the Eastern wolves howl."

I don't know her true feelings. I'm relieved when she nods. It seems like she doesn't hate me, after all.

"First of all, let's deliver some apples to Ms. Shouko. You'll usually hear wolves howling near closing time, anyway. They respond to the announcements in the park." Sakurako-san is in a very good mood.

I clean Hector off with wet tissues and towels. The two dogs that live at the orchard stick their noses into the car to sniff him. I take the basket of apples to the front seat, making sure the pile doesn't collapse. Even with how well behaved Hector is, it would be dangerous to leave him alone with such delicious apples.

That wasn't very smart of me. With the scent of the apples flooding the car, I can hardly resist grabbing one. There's still a little longer until lunchtime. I'm pretty hungry.

"…There sure were a lot of them. Maybe gran can make the ones that don't look as nice into a pie." Sakurako-san says without looking at me while I pet the dogs. She would know if I tried to take an apple.

"They still taste the same. Even though we were sharing them with other people, I still wish we could have kept more."

"That's your share. It's your reward for your hard work. You can feel free to take them with you."

“You say hard work, but… it really wasn’t much effort at all. Besides, it was fun.” I try to be polite, but I end up grabbing an apple and taking a big bite out of it.

“Oh.” The pocket of my parka suddenly vibrates. I quickly take out my phone. I’m getting a call. The display says “Yuriko Kougami.”

“Speak of the devil, it’s Kougami.”

This is unusual. I think this might be the first time she’s ever called me first. We’ve exchanged contact information, but we usually only text.

“What’s-“

“Tatewaki-kun!”

“Huh?” Just as I try to ask her why she’s phoning me, she yells into the receiver.

“Please! I want to meet with Sakurako-san! Tell me her contact info!” Her voice is frantic and desperate.

“Sakurako-san? Well… I’m with her right now.” I answer. A sigh of relief meets my ear. “Should I give her the phone? What happened?”

She doesn’t answer my question. Instead, all I can hear is her breathing.

“Are you… crying?” I ask.

Sakurako-san suddenly leans over my shoulder from behind me and listens in. I guess she could hear our conversation coming from my phone. Feeling her warmth on my back surprises me for a moment, but right now, I’m more worried about Kougami.

“Are you okay? What happened?”

“The cat…”

“Cat?”

“My aunt’s cat has been missing, and today she was found...” Kougami is so upset that she just repeats her short explanation. “A little while ago, she was found in a garbage bin… she was dead, with an injured neck…”

“Was it in an accident?”

“I don’t know, but I feel like it wasn’t normal. My aunt is being stalked now, so…”

“Stalker?!”

Kougami accidentally starts raising her voice. A small sigh escapes Sakurako-san’s lips.

“Where are you?” Sakurako-san asks. I quickly realize that question wasn’t meant for me, but for Kougami, over the phone.

“Ah, Kougami, where are you right now?”

“Nankou, at my aunt’s apartment,” Kougami replies.

I tell Sakurako-san, but she seems to have already heard through the phone. “Tell us how to get there,” I say. I let her take my phone for now.

“Then I’ll go get the address now. Umm… Nankou-“

While I enter the address into the car navigation system, we hurry to Sakurako-san’s house to drop off Hector and the apples. I feel bad for gran, she’s horrified by how dirty Hector is, but we have to head to Nankou anyway.

Part two

Her aunt's apartment is by the beach in a bright, open area along the national highway. It's at the opposite end of the residential area of Nankou from my house. There's a post office, drug store, and a big supermarket nearby, so there's a lot of pedestrians.

The trees along the road and in front of the house and covered in the colours of fall, and the Japanese rowan fruits are red. A deep, dark crimson, like blood. It's like they're serving a constant reminder of the current situation.

The brand new apartment is called Bowdoin St. It's 3 stories tall, and made from reddish-brown bricks, somehow giving it a high-class feeling. I've never been there, but it looks like it's from New York based on what I've seen in movies.

"This is a nice apartment. It looks foreign."

"It was probably built with that idea in mind. Bowdoin Street is a residential area in Boston." Sakurako-san says, pointing to the brick walls by the entrance Letters spelling "Bowdoin ST" decorate the wall.

Kougami's aunt's room is on the first floor, facing the street. A short while after we use the intercom, Kougami greets us.

"Sakurako-san!" Kougami says, jumping towards Sakurako-san.

She's wearing a red and black gingham blouse with a simple denim mini skirt. Her hair is also tied in a ponytail, which is unusual for her. A woman with a bob cut, who looks to be in her mid thirties, peeks out at us. She has a burgundy knit shirt, and beige pants. Her rough appearance makes me think she's on a break. Her hips and chest are large, but she doesn't seem to be overweight. Her lips are thick, and she has a mole next to her mouth. Her face resembles Kougami's. They both have the same straight, black hair, and red spots next to their eyes from crying.

"Where is the cat?" Sakurako-san says before she even greets them.

Kougami's aunt starts looking like she's about to cry. "…Let's talk inside." She says, trying to hold back her tears as she leads us into the room.

I make sure not to kick my shoes off in the entrance, and follow into the room. I don't know how to describe the scent of her room, but it's somewhat sweet and flowery.

"Thank you for coming."

We all sit in the living room, while Kougami's aunt disappears into the kitchen. Then, she brings a white cat into the room.

"Thank you so much for coming. Neither of us knew what to do…"

Sakurako-san sits next to Kougami, who picks up a white cat that walked up to her. The cat makes a sort of "eow" sound while Kougami holds it so that it can't escape.

"She's my aunt on my mom's side, Tsubaki-chan. This cat is Bianca," Kougami says, looking toward the kitchen. The living room and kitchen are separated by coloured beads on strings. They're still swaying from Tsubaki-san walking through them.

"Bianca… that's the feminine form of the Italian word for white," Sakurako-san says briefly after a little while.

Kougami tilts her head slightly and nods. I suddenly hear a small meow, and turn around to see a large, long haired cat with light brown stripes climbing onto my lap.

"Oh"

"This one is Kuu. He's a maine coon, and he's friendly."

“Huh… he’s calm.”

I’m actually not very familiar with cats. I’m completely a dog person. This is the first time I’ve had a cat climb onto my lap like this. It’s cute, but I can’t adjust my legs and feet, and honestly, I’m not very comfortable.

Kougami’s aunt seems to live alone. The interior consists of yellow, orange, green, and light brown. It’s bright and gorgeous. I see a decorative plant by the window, and suddenly remember Kiyomi-san. Do all independent, adult women like rooms like this? I instinctively look at Sakurako-san. I’ve never seen her room before so maybe, no, it’s definitely orderly.

Kuu-kun seems frustrated that I can’t calm down, and moves to Sakurako-san’s lap. It seems it makes her happy, since she smiles and laughs.

“He’s big. One theory behind why they’re called maine coons is because they originated in the state of Maine, and they look similar to raccoons. The cats are certainly large. They’re also said to be smart, obedient, friendly cats.” She puts her hand on his fluffy neck, and looks truly delighted. It’s a different smile than the one she has when she’s with Hector. I’ve seen her smile countless times, but this isn’t an expression I’ve seen her make before.

“So, where’s the dead cat?” Sakurako-san says with a smile while she picks up the big cat.

The way she can say that so casually while holding a live cat makes my chest hurt. I wonder if Kougami is thinking the same thing. She hangs her head, then looks up again. Tsubaki-san brings a set of transparent glass teacups with flower designs on them. My mom has a similar tea set. I think it’s jasmine tea.

“Go ahead.” She looks like she’s been crying, since her eyes are red.

“I’m here to see the dead cat.” Sakurako-san says coldly.

Tsubaki-san doesn’t even have time to prepare herself for that statement. She probably wanted to calm down first, but Sakurako-san is as unrestrained as ever.

“Please… Wait just a minute.” Eventually, Kougami gets up and brings a cardboard box in from the next room over. “She was found this morning.”

I look into the box. There’s a grey striped cat lying in it. I’m not sure what breed she is, but Tsubaki-san says she’s an American short hair. Her grey fur is covered in spots of crusty, dark red blood.

“Is she really dead…?” Kougami says, looking at Sakurako-san and I. I’m sure she already knows the answer, but she still wants confirmation.

The cardboard has the distinct smell of decomposition. The scent of an animal that has “broken.”

“Her name was Tsun. She used to be a stray, but I took her in after she got injured. She wasn’t very friendly with people. When I tried to greet her, she’d turn around and walk the other way. But even if she had a bit of an attitude… I don’t know what I’ll do without her.” Tsubaki-san says sadly, forcing the corners of her mouth into a smile. Her feelings of love for her cute, sassy cat… Those feels come through in her choked voice. “I don’t know how many times I asked, ‘can you hear me?’ and waited for Tsun to reply with her usual meow. She was a smart girl… She didn’t come home the day before yesterday, but I didn’t think something like this happened.” Tsubaki-san starts to sob.

Seeing her tears pour out makes my eyes start to feel hot, too.

“She wasn’t the type of cat to get lost, really” Kougami gently strokes Tsubaki-san’s back, and explains to us instead.

It seems the one who found Tsun was Kougami, not Tsubaki-san.
Since a distant relative on her father’s side that was living in Kushiro passed away, her parents were going to the funeral, she’s staying at Tsubaki-san’s house. Tsubaki-san works at a clothing store, and she seems to get along well with Kougami. Tsubaki-san loves cats, but now instead of three, she only has 2 of them. Tsun was originally a stray that she started keeping, so she liked going outside. She always returned within half a day, so that day she was sent out without any concern, as well. However, Tsun didn’t return, even after the whole night.

“Yesterday we looked around but couldn’t find her, so today we were going to make posters and ask around.”

However, Tsun was found without the posters. She looked completely different. It was the first time they wished she hadn’t come home.

“If I knew it would end up like this, I would never have let her outside. But taking away her freedom like that feels like it would rob her of her dignity. It may sound like an exaggeration, but…” Tsubaki-san says.

Certainly, it may be an overstatement, but unlike dogs, which are obedient to humans, cats definitely have a certain “dignity”.

“I’m sure she was a lovely cat” I say, expressing my condolences. I’m not very good with words, so I always struggle with what to say at times like this.

“Then, it’s been about two days since she went missing.” Sakurako-san says while putting on her usual nitrile gloves. She’s polite, but doesn’t hold back as she starts to investigate the cat’s remains. “She’s certainly dead… she’s still stiff. I can’t say for sure since the temperature was low this morning, but it seems it has been within 30 hours since she died. Tell me a bit more about the situation. Today isn’t garbage collection day.”

Kougami and Tsubaki-san look at each other, and nod. “I… this morning I went to a nearby convenience store. I was trying to print pictures of Tsun to make the posters, but the printer here wasn’t working, so I went to print them at the convenience store.” When she saw the cat’s corpse, she stroked her grey fur. “When I was leaving the convenience store, I noticed a bunch of crows crowding around a garbage can. It was a metal box type to keep crows out, so it wasn’t easy to look inside…” Kougami bites her lip. It must be hard to think about. “I normally would have just walked by without thinking about it, but I had a bad feeling. After I chased away the crows, I looked inside. There was a small box and-“

“And Tsun-chan was inside?” I feel bad about making her say something like that when her voice is already trembling, so I cut off her explanation.

Kougami nods while tears slide down her cheeks. This isn’t my first time seeing her cry, but I still hate seeing her cry like this. I’m not uncomfortable with her crying, I just want her to smile like always. I love seeing her smile. Of course, only as a friend.

“You said it was when you were leaving. Were there no crows when you entered?”

“Since the signal had just changed, I used to crosswalk on the other side. It was a wide road with a lot of lanes, so I didn’t notice.”

Sakurako-san asks questions while she takes a loupe out of her bag. Kougami gives clear answers to all the questions.

“Is this the box that you found her in?”

“Yes, we left her as she was.”

The box has the logo of a popular online store on it. Unfortunately, the sticker with the address on it is torn off.

“There’s a deep wound on her neck… But there doesn’t seem to be much blood on the box. That means she was put in this box after she died.” Sakurako-san says, looking through the loupe. “The cause of death… could be trauma, blood loss, or shock. The wound on her neck could also mean she suffocated.”

“Suffocated…” Kougami’s expression turns cloudy.

A neck injury that caused suffocation – that’s the same way Kougami’s grandma died. Kougami’s throat tightens, and she clenches her fist against her chest.

“She died from the injury… right?” I ask. “Did a person do it?” I remember that Kougami mentioned a stalker on the phone.

“…No, look here.”

I tilt my head in confusion at Sakurako-san.

“There’s a beautiful tooth mark here.”

“Tooth mark?”

“Ah… perhaps it was from an animal. It doesn’t seem like it was a very big animal.”

“You mean she may have been attacked by an animal?”

Sakurako-san nods.

“Then… it wasn’t the stalker?” Tsubaki-san says.

Kougami drops her shoulders, relieved.

“We definitely…”

“No. I can’t say for sure whether this crime was committed by a human or not-“ The intercom suddenly buzzes as Sakurako-san starts to talk.

My body stiffens and my heart starts pounding in an instant, and the three of us, not including Sakurako-san, make eye contact with each other. After a moment of silence, the intercom buzzes again. Holding her breath, Tsubaki-san quietly stands up and look around the display. She exhales with relief.

“Who is it?” Kougami-san asks uneasily. “Sudou-kun. He emailed a little while ago,” Tsubaki-san replies.

“That’s Tsubaki-chan’s boyfriend,” Kougami whispers to us.

Tsubaki-san quickly walks to the entranceway. As soon as the door opens, I hear a man ask, “are you okay?! I slipped out of the hospital as soon as I saw your email saying that Tsun was found. I was worried about you,” He says as he enters the room. He appears to be younger than Tsubaki-san, maybe in his early thirties.

He looks like a model, he’s handsome, has chiseled features, and the whole room smells good when he walks in. Ariwara-san does, Isozaki-sensei does, do all cool guys smell like that? Isozaki-sensei doesn’t seem to wear a particular cologne. Maybe it has to do with his DNA. They’re probably built differently from sweaty high school students like me. I’ll never understand handsome men.

“…Who are these people?” Sudou-san asks a bit suspiciously once he notices us in the room. He seems to be staring at me in particular.

“Yuriko’s classmate and acquaintance.”

“Yuriko-chan’s?”

“Yes. In the summer, at the mountain…”

“Oh, your mom…”

The two of them speak quietly to each other. Tsubaki-san must have told him about how we found Kougami’s grandmother’s corpse this summer. I make eye contact with him and nod. Since I can hear their conversation, I’m sure Kougami can, too. However, her expression doesn’t seem to be any different from before. She pets the white cat. Even though she’s trying not to show it, I can still see how sad she is. When Kougami notices me looking at her, she smiles at me as if to ask, ‘what’s wrong?’ I think about telling her she doesn’t need to push herself. At least, not in front of Sakurako-san and I.

“It’s nice to meet you.”

“Oh, you too…”

Sudou-san doesn’t seem to notice Kougami’s feelings, and proceeds to greet us. Sakurako-san looks up at him for a moment, then returns to looking at Tsun’s corpse. Even if she’s acting the same as always, I still feel bad about her behaviour.

“She said that Tsun might have been attacked by an animal.” Tsubaki-san says right after we finish our greetings.

“An animal?”

“Yes. She seems to be familiar with things like this. The police originally said that Yuriko’s grandma committed suicide, but later decided it was an accident after she got involved.” Tsubaki-san says, and asks Kougami, “isn’t that right?” She then looks at Sakurako-san for confirmation.

“An animal? Was Tsun-chan injured?”

“Yes, probably. There’s marks that look like teeth left on her.” Tsubaki-san says, looking at me this time.

“Sudou-kun is an AHT at a veterinary clinic. He works at the Toyooka veterinary hospital.”

“AHT?” I repeat back the unfamiliar word automatically.

“It stands for Animal Health Technician. Simply put, they’re medical assistants for veterinarians. Since there isn’t a national standard in Japan, the qualifications are decided by the vocational schools, so their abilities can vary,” Sakurako-san answers.

Sudou-san looks taken aback for a moment. Being disregarded like that… must feel unpleasant.

“Given the shape of the tooth marks, it could have been a stray dog. It’s not from a human.” He says quickly, sounding slightly grumpy. Perhaps it’s because of Sakurako-san talking about how there’s no national qualifications. However, her normal tone sounds like she’s looking down upon people.

“Stray dog…?” Tsubaki-san sounds a bit surprised, and repeats what Sudou-san said.

“Yes. So at least it wasn’t a person that killed the cat, right?” Sudou-san exhales, and answers her in as soft a voice as possible. “So, you don’t need to worry about the stalker. I’m sure she was attacked by a stray dog in the neighbourhood, and someone found her and threw her in the garbage. It may sound heartless, but maybe the person didn’t like cats.”

Sure, if you don't like cats, you don't need to be friendly with them, but throwing the remains of a cat in the trash is just cruel. In society, stray cats are seen as pests to get rid of, so I guess people who would do something must exist. If someone wanted to get rid of the remains right away, of course they would put it in the garbage on collection day. If I found a dead animal in front of my house, I wouldn't know what to do with it. If you have a yard at your house, you could bury it there, but at an apartment building, there's a lot of people living there, and not much yard space.

So while this was a very sad, unfortunate incident, there's no need to be scared. Sudou-san comforts Tsubaki-san. Even still, Tsubaki-san says "I hope so, but…", still not convinced. It seems like maybe it would have been better if the perpetrator was the stalker. I feel slightly uncomfortable. I don't think this incident has been completely sorted out, yet.

"Why did you conclude that it was a stray dog?" However, one person voices their objection to Sudou-san. It couldn't be anyone but Sakurako-san.

Sudou-san raises his eyebrows for a moment, but doesn't break his calm tone. "Let's see…" he replies to Sakurako-san. "Well I can't really think of any other animal that would attack a cat… What do you think?"

"I don't think there are many stray dogs in the city."

"It could have been a dog that escaped, or Tsun could have accidentally gotten into a dog's yard. There's always a risk of an accident happening when you let your cat outside."

"But I don't see many dogs outside" Tsubaki-san objects.

"There certainly aren't many dogs, but lots of people tie their dogs up outside when it's warm out. She could've even been attacked by a dog that someone was walking. The owner could've panicked when they saw the collar, and didn't do the right thing." Sudou-san speaks awkwardly but politely.

"…Then, since I let Tsun outside, does that make it my fault? I'm the one in the wrong? This wasn't the work of a stalker?"

"Tsun was the one who was careless. I know you're worried about the stalker, but I'm here with you, and the wounds weren't unnatural." Sudou-san says softly, wiping away Tsubaki-san's tears with his finger. "That cat would've died already if you hadn't saved her. Don't think it's your fault… Okay? I'm sure she's grateful to have been with you." He hugs Tsubaki-san tight. He suddenly looks up towards Kougami. "I'm glad you're worried about her, but Tsubaki-san has been very high strung and scared lately, so please be careful about what you say to her."

"But…"

"I know you're worried that there might be a connection between this and the stalker. There's no need to hide how you feel," Sudou-san says softly to Kougami, even though Tsubaki-san can still hear.

"Do you know who this stalker could be?"

"Yes, probably." Tsubaki-san slightly nods.

"It's someone you've met before, right?" Kougami confirms with Tsubaki-san.

"A clerk at the pet store I visit has been talking to me for the past few months, but he kept trying to flirt with Tsubaki-chan. He even sent me texts saying to give her to him."

"He tried to flirt with her?" I say, surprised.

“That’s right. It was like he was possessed or something. He called her persistently, sent her letters, and even went to her work… Tsubaki-chan was really troubled by it.” As Kougami continues, Tsubaki-san nods while looking at Sakurako-san and I. Sakurako-san looks bored. She’s laying on the sofa while petting Kuu.

“He didn’t get along very well with my cats from the start. He especially wasn’t fond of Tsun, so he had a hard time with them…”

“But I can’t imagine someone doing such a terrible thing. There’s nothing good about a man who sneaks around in the shadows like that.” Sudou-san sighs. It doesn’t seem like he believes there is a stalker.

“Didn’t someone break one of the windows before? I was scared, so I went to the police, but they said it was probably some kids playing pranks. I don’t think that was it.”

Sudou-san sighs again. “Like I said, that was-“

“Which window?” Sakurako-san, who had been quietly playing with the cat, asks. She’s already standing up and examining all the windows in the room.

“One in the bedroom.” Tsubaki-san says, opening a door at the back of the living room.

“Oh… Are you sure it’s okay?” I ask Tsubaki-san, apologizing for Sakurako-san entering her room without asking first.

She seems hesitant, but says, “yes, go ahead.”I follow Sakurako-san into the room.

I still feel like it’s wrong to look around in here. It’s a woman’s bedroom, after all, even if I do have a reason to be there.

“This window?” Sakurako-san pays no attention to me, and opens up one of the windows.

I try to just look at Sakurako-san’s back, or outside, but in such a nice looking, sweet smelling bedroom, it’s hard not to look around.

“Hm… Let’s check outside.”

It’s the kind of window that you have to push open, rather than the sliding type. Sakurako-san heads outside without saying anything. Sudou-san is the only one that looks confused, Tsubaki-san and Kougami just obediently follow Sakurako-san.

“Sorry, she’s always like this…” I apologize to Sudou-san.

He looks over his shoulder and says “Well… As long as she settles everything, it’s fine.” His expression isn’t exactly saying “it’s fine,” though.

By the time I get outside, Sakurako-san is already at the window. The window isn’t facing a highway with lots of cars, just a side street in a residential area. It’s near a small park, however, so while it’s not endless, there’s some cars and people passing by.

“Is there a lot of foot traffic? There could have been kids playing with a ball and threw it wrong… it could have been something like that, right?”

“It wasn’t a ball that broke the window, it was a rock. Among all the glass shards in the room, there was also a rock about 10cm wide.” Tsubaki-san shakes her head.

In front of the window there’s a concrete wall that’s shorter than me separating the apartment from the street.

“Do you still have the rock?” Sakurako-san asks.

“It… It gave me the creeps so I threw it in the garden.”

“Can you find it?”

“No, sorry.” Tsubaki-san shakes her head apologetically. Then she says, “oh wait,” and walks a short distance from us. “It looks like the stone that are in the garden. Maybe they just picked up one of these rocks and threw it.”

She said garden, but it’s mostly covered in gravel, except for cobblestone in the corners. There’s a storage room for the residents, a bike locker, and a small flower bed with a framed picture of a cat.

“The crushed stone is basalt.” Sakurako-san picks up a few stones, then snorts and looks around again. She stands by the window, and suddenly throws the stone at the wall.

“Isn’t that dangerous?!”

The stone breaks apart as it hits the wall, scattering the pieces on the ground.

“If it just slipped out of someone’s hand, it wouldn’t break the window.”

“Huh?”

“There’s quite a distance between the fence and the window. If the person was on the other side of the fence, it would take quite a bit of force.”

“Should we… measure the distance?” She says. I open an app on my phone.

“I downloaded an app recently that lets you take a picture, then it measures the distance for you.”

I happened to download it thinking it would be useful, but I didn’t have much use for it until now. I take a few steps away from everyone else, then focusing the camera on the area between the window and fence. After I take the picture, I tap my finger on the space between the fence and window. It beeps, then displays the number “297” in red text on the screen.

“It’s about 3 meters.”

“And the height of the fence is around 160cm?”

“…That’s right.” I tap the fence, and it shows that it’s almost what she predicted. Comparing it to Sudou-san, who is 181cm tall, it seems about right.

“With this distance and height, wouldn’t the stone have broken? I can’t deny the possibility that the person was inside the fence, but they would have ended up getting hit with fragments. There wouldn’t be any point in throwing a rock at the window if the person throwing it got hurt.”

“…” Nobody can argue with Sakurako-san.

“That’s why I think it was clearly done with ill intent. It wasn’t an accident or a silly prank. There’s someone close to you who has horrible feelings about you.”

“No…” Tsubaki-san sits on the ground. She covers her face and hangs her head.

“Tsubaki-chan…” Kougami rushes to Tsubaki-san’s side.

Sudou-san also seems upset. He gently puts his hand around Tsubaki-san’s back.

“The criminal has to be Kenichi… I can’t take this anymore.” Tsubaki-san says. She takes a few deep breaths, then quietly says, “I hate this.” She hits her fist against the ground. “I hate being afraid all the time like this! I’m going to talk to my ex right now!” Her fear and sadness changes into anger.

“Right now… That’s dangerous. What are you going to do if he really is a stalker who broke your window and killed your cat?” Sudou-san says in a panic.

It sounds like Tsubaki-san isn’t just a meek woman who’ll take things lying down. She stands up straight.

“I can’t let things stay like this.”

“But I have to go back to the clinic soon. I can’t go with you right now, but I don’t want you to go alone.” Sudou-san says. Now that I think about it, he probably just slipped out of his work for a while. He grabs Tsubaki-san’s shoulders and says, “I can’t let you go.”

“But…!”

“Why don’t we take a look at the situation first, then go to the police if we need to, okay?”

“But what if that just escalates the situation?”

“Then why don’t you go stay at my older sister’s place for a little while? Then you won’t be alone, at least. Besides, you’re always overworking yourself. Why don’t you go take a break for a while?”

“Your sister is… always busy with her shop and caregiving, so I don’t want to bother her. If I went there, she would want to take care of me. I can’t make her take time off working for that.”

Sudou-san tries his best to convince her while he keeps an eye on his watch, but Tsubaki-san clearly makes her point and shakes her head.

“Anyway, please just don’t do anything irresponsible, okay?” Sudou-san ends up being strained for time. He seems to be torn between taking the rest of the day off and going back to handle work. He pulls on his hair.

“…I agree with what Sudou-san said.” Kougami mutters after we watch Sudou-san’s car pull out of the parking lot.

“My mom will be back soon. You might feel like you’re bothering her, but even if you don’t want to stay, my mom and I would be happy to have you over. If you stay at my house, you can bring your cats… okay?” Kougami says, choosing her words carefully.

I’m sure Tsubaki-san would feel like she’s intruding when Kougami’s family is taking care of her grandpa. Still, Kougami is worried about her aunt, and speaks in a soft voice.

“But I don’t want to be a bother.” However, it seems Tsubaki-san has a firm resolve. She shakes her head. “Besides, you often see on the news how much trouble it causes families when someone burdens the family, don’t you? That’s why I have to settle this myself,” Tsubaki-san says clearly.

“…Then I’ll go, too. I can’t let you go alone, Tsubaki-chan.” Kougami takes a deep breath, and with her fist tightly holding her chest, she makes her proposal.

After thinking for a while, Tsubaki-san refuses. “You can’t. What if it’s dangerous? If anything happened to you-“

“Then I’ll go.”

They’re both worried about each other. It can’t be helped. The moment I try to say that I would accompany them, Sakurako-san’s voice cuts through their conversation.

“Huh? But, Sakurako-san, I can’t get you involv-“

“I can’t just come here then ignore you and go home. I’ll go, too.” For some reason, it feels lame to be the last one to join in, but I offer anyway. “Isn’t it better to have more people? Then there’s more people to call for help if it’s needed.” Besides, I might serve as a deterrence, compared to if the women went alone.

“I’m sorry, Tatewaki-kun… thank you,” Kougami says, tightly holding the cuff of my jacket.

Honestly, I'm scared and I don't want to go, but I'm a man. I can't say I don't like it when a girl asks something of me like this.

"It'll be okay. Now, let's go."

I try to sound a bit cool, but nobody pays any attention to me. Tsubaki-san and Kougami are completely relying on the two of us. They turn to Sakurako-san and thank her.

Part 3

Kougami and Tsubaki-san get into Sakurako-san's car, and we head to Kenichi's house. I wonder how far away it is? Since it would be easy for him to escape, we didn't contact him in advance.

Tsubaki-san says, "what if he isn't home…" but I think that might just be what she's hoping for.

She wants to talk with him, but he's also done terrible things. She sighs as she walks up to the intercom. He apparently has a dog. As soon as it notice that there's visitors, it starts barking at the door.

"Tsubaki?! What are you doing here?" Eventually, a surprised man peeks through the door. He looks happy.

He's tall and looks like he hasn't shaved, but he seems like he'd be considered attractive. He looks to be about the same age as Sakurako-san, or maybe a bit younger.

"This is unusual. Do you want to come in?" His familiar tone makes me think they used to be pretty close. In contrast to his happy expression, Tsubaki-san looks serious.

"Why did you do all that?"

"Huh? What do you mean?" He asks.

"…What you did to Tsun."

"What happened with Tsun?"

"That's enough!" Tsubaki-san suddenly shouts.

"W-what? Wait… Fine, let's just go inside to talk."

The apartment building doesn't seem particularly old or new, but it lacks individuality. There's a sign that says all the rooms are full. His room is exactly in the centre. He seems embarrassed about the uproar. He invites us in, but Tsubaki-san doesn't respond. He seems suspicious once he notices that he's being visited by Kougami, Sakurako-san, and me instead of just Tsubaki-san.

"No. I won't go inside. You need to stop lying. I found Tsun left in the garbage."

"In the garbage?" From his tone, it sounds like he doesn't understand. His voice just makes Tsubaki-san even more angry.

"She died."

"Huh?"

"You won't stop… leaving me silent calls, opening my mail, emailing me constantly… I've endured it all this time, but I can't stand it anymore! It's too cruel! Just stop, already!!"

"W-wait. You really think I killed her?!"

"Who else would it have been?!"

“Your voice is too loud!” He says, putting his hands up to try to calm her down.

“…Sure, cats don’t like me, but that’s no reason for me to murder one! Tsun especially wasn’t fond of me, but I still thought she was a cute cat. I didn’t kill her. I can’t believe she’s really dead…” Tsubaki-san’s ex-boyfriend says like he’s making up an excuse.

I see a black, white, and brown dog with floppy ears appear for a moment before it goes back into the room.

“Is that your dog?” Sakurako-san asks.

He still seems suspicious of us, but answers her question. “Ah, well… I work at a pet shop, and unsold animals really get to me.”

“What breed is it?”

“Pug and beagle mix…”

With those words, Tsubaki-san’s anger is reignited. “What if your dog attacked Tsun? How cruel!”

“Wait! It really wasn’t me! Well, since you ignored my calls and emails I visited your house a couple of times, but I didn’t kill your cat!”

“Then who did it!”

“Tsubaki-chan…” Since the two of them are starting to get too heated, Kougami grabs Tsubaki-san’s arm to try to calm her down.

“Besides, I… I saw the man who was taking secret pictures from outside your room several times.”

“You’re lying!”

“I’m not lying! I tried to tell you several times, but you didn’t listen!” He argues, and takes out his cellphone. “I’ll send it to you,” he says, sending an email to Tsubaki-san.

“Look, see?”

“Huh…?” Tsubaki-san only looks half convinced as she opens the email, but her expression immediately stiffens. We also go to look, and see a picture of a very large man with a camera in a familiar place.

“I thought that maybe he was your boyfriend, but I thought that taking pictures of your bedroom sneakily was strange, so I took a picture. Look at the date, it was the week before last. So? Do you believe me now?”

“No, I don’t know who that is…”

I try to zoom in on the picture, but it just becomes blurry. The man with the camera doesn’t seem to be young. His body is large and solid, like a bear.

“…You really didn’t kill my cat?”

“Of course not! That cat wasn’t docile by any means. She was always wild, I’m sure she just got into a fight with a stray dog. It may sound harsh, but she was so ferocious that she might have injured you someday.”

“But cats aren’t usually too close with their owners to begin with. Sure, if it doesn’t go well, you can be bitten or scratched, but that’s how cats are.” It seems even Tsubaki-san can’t deny the part about her being wild. Even so, she continues to argue with her ex-boyfriend.

“I know that. Anyway, if that’s the case, wouldn’t it be better if you stopped having cats for a while?”

“Huh?”

“Just in case, since I’m worried something will happen to you as well, rather than just the cats. It would be better if you stayed with me so you’re safe, Tsubaki.”

“…What did you just say?”

“My house has a watchdog. Did you know? Beagles are small hunting dogs, but they’re brave and loyal.”

“Hunting dog?” I raise my voice without meaning to. He nods.

“They were originally used to hunt rabbits. They’re very strong and obedient,” he says, grinning proudly.

Suddenly, my heart breaks.

“I’m saying this for your own good. If you’re ever scared, come to my place. In a situation like that, you wouldn’t have any objections. Don’t you agree?”

“I don’t! I already have a boyfriend. Things are over between us! Don’t try to act concerned about me ever again!”

“Tsubaki!”

Tsubaki-san slams the door to the apartment shut, and goes back to Sakurako-san’s car. “Let’s just leave.” Tsubaki-san says out of fear that her ex will follow her.

Sakurako-san seems a bit more reckless than normal, she even starts up the car before I put on my seatbelt.

“The one who attacked Tsun… I wonder if it wasn’t Kenichi-kun.”

After a while, I look behind me to see how Tsubaki-san is doing. She seems to have calmed down quite a bit.

“What should I do?”

Sakurako-san looks at Tsubaki-san in the mirror for a moment, then looks away as she answers. “A hunting dog… he said. For hunting rabbits.”

If they can attack rabbits, couldn’t they also attack cats? That’s what I thought. But still, what was with the man with the camera? Was it just some pervert?

“…She shouldn’t have gotten involved with that guy.” I think while leaning against the window.

I hear Kougami speaking in an annoyed voice, This is my first time hearing her angry. “Did his dog really kill Tsun-chan?”

“I can’t say anything unless I properly investigate it.”

Sakurako-san steers the car silently while she thinks. I look back and see Tsubaki-san restlessly tapping her knee with her fingers. It’s perfectly reasonable. Still, we can’t completely rule out the possibility that her ex boyfriend was also taking secret pictures. The fact that he took pictures of the man with the camera proves that he was spending time around her house.

“…I wish I had the ring of Solomon,” Kougami mutters.

“Huh?”

“King Solomon was a king in Israel in ancient times. It’s said that he was very wise, and that he employed demons and angels. It’s said his ring was given to him by an angel, and made him able to understand the words of animals.”

“So if you had Solomon’s ring, you could ask Kenichi-san’s dog, and Kuu about what happened, right? Humans are animals, and even if you don’t do anything wrong, you still might never understand each other…”

Kougami adds on to Sakurako-san's explanation. If there was a magic ring like that, Tsun might not have died. Tsubaki-san also wouldn't have had to suffer so much.

"But there isn't a ring here," Sakurako-san says indifferently.

Tsubaki-san and Kougami both let out a sigh.

"However, we can still hear what the cat has to say."

"Huh?"

"We can ask Tsun herself about who killed her," Sakurako-san says, then laughs boldly.

Part 4

We drop Tsubaki-san off at her apartment, then head to Kougami's house. It seems both her parents out, so she has to go home to take care of her grandfather. Kougami temporarily leaves Bianca and Kuu there, since she's worried about them.

"You're in the way, I need to investigate the cat remains a bit more. It may be necessary to dissect her, but… I should be able to come to an answer you'll be satisfied with." Sakurako-san persuades Tsubaki-san, so she leaves Tsun's remains with her.

She seems a bit hesitant when Sakurako-san mentions dissecting her, but she decides that there's no other way to "hear her story". She hands over Tsun's remains while saying thank you.

"Are you going home?" I ask. She quickly says "no".

"Then where are you going?"

"I'm going to visit Sawa-san. He knows more about animals than I do."

For a moment, I wonder who Sawa-san is, but I remember he's gran's relative. He's a caretaker at the Asahiyama zoo. The Asahiyama zoo is always crowded on holidays, or days with nice weather.

Sakurako-san pays for my ticket at the gate since she has an annual pass. The reception desk contacts Sawa-san for us, so we disinfect our shoes before going inside. It's been a long time. I get distracted from looking at the shops, but Sakurako-san walks away without waiting for me. I follow after her. She keeps walking until she reaches the clock tower. I guess this is where we're supposed to meet.

"Are we just going to wait now?" I want to go see more animals if we're just going to wait here.

"No, he said he'd be here soon."

"I see."

I'm a bit let down. I guess I'll come alone next time and look around more.

"Sawa-san… was it?"

I heard he's gran's relative. I remember as I say it that he and gran have the same last name.

"I guess he's another Sasaki-sensei," I say. Sakurako-san grins.

Sasaki-sensei was her teacher when she was in high school. He was a biology teacher who shared her love for bones.

"That's right… He's also someone I kind of consider a teacher."

“-Could you at least be considerate enough to call me in advance?” I suddenly hear a deep voice from behind me.

“Oh.”

Sakurako-san bows a bit. I turn to look at him. He looks strong, like the type to play sports, and he’s sunburned. He’s wearing a jumper with the Asahiyama logo on it.

“Let me introduce you, boy. This is Sawa-san.”

“Huh…?”

I’m surprised. I imagined him looking more scholarly, but the young man standing before me is completely different. I guess I’d call it the lean yet muscular type? Even through his thick clothes it’s easy to tell how strong his body is, and feel his tough atmosphere.

“Ah… I’m Shoutarou Tatewaki.”

“I know. Granny told me. You like to eat a lot of delicious rice,” Sawa-san says.

I’m surprised to hear that gran talks about me to her relatives. It makes me a little happy. However… I feel somewhat conflicted about how she talks about how much rice I eat.

“Geez. Remember that I have a job to do, too. To start with, I just got back from Borneo the day before yesterday.”

“I see, was it hot in Borneo?”

Sawa-san looks sullen, as if Sakurako-san asked something terrible. “The humidity was so bad. It was 100% in the mornings,” he answers. The two of them start to walk.

Even though she asked, it was probably pointless for him to answer. She doesn’t seem angry.

“Borneo… is there a new animal coming?”

“No, it was about the elephants,” Sakurako-san says.

“Huh? Is an elephant coming to Asahiyama?” I ask Sawa-san while chasing after the two of them.

Asahiyama’s elephant died long ago, and there aren’t any at the Sapporo zoo. The other day Utsumi-san said, “my four year old nieces have never seen a real elephant.” It makes me sad that other children won’t be able to feel the same excitement and surprise at how big elephants are as I did as a child.

“No, unfortunately now isn’t a good time for that. I was working on a project regarding the palm oil plantations in Borneo. They’re cutting down forests one after another to make palm oil. As a result, elephants are being forced into remote areas, and exterminated as pests.” Sawa-san says in a bitter voice as we pass by the Shinrin wolf exhibit.

I remember how the Japanese wolves were exterminated as pests to the point where they’re extinct, and start to feel an unpleasant sensation spread through my chest.

“Palm oil is one of the raw materials in soap. It’s very important to our lives. Still, most people don’t know about what’s happening. That’s why we’re trying to create awareness at Asahiyama.”

“I… I thought the zoo just kept animals.”

“Animals are an important part of it. Although I can’t save every animal, I want to do everything I can. No matter how much you regret it later, you can’t get back a life that’s been lost.”

His words linger in my mind. ‘You can’t get back a life that’s been lost.’ It’s been one year since I met Sakurako-san. In this past year, I’ve experienced the loss of so many lives. I’ll probably continue to regret that for my whole life. We continue through the garden, then enter an area I’ve never been to before. It’s where all the caretaking staff are.

“Sorry for the mess,” he says, as we enter a messy room.

It seems like he was working here until just before he met up with us. The desk is covered in documents, animal related books, and DVDs without any kind of order to them. The shelves in this room remind me of the science reference room. Sawa-san takes off his jumper and ties it around his waist by the sleeves. I can see how muscular he is through his t-shirt. He doesn’t seem like the kind of person who would create skeletal specimens. I don’t know much about what it takes to care for animals, but I’m sure it requires a lot of physical labour and intelligence.

“So? Why did you want to talk to me about?” Sawa-san says while he fishes for something in his desk drawer.

He pulls out three tea bags, a stained mug, and two paper cups. He points behind me with his chin. Following his line of sight, I notice an electric kettle. I guess he wants me to make it.

“A cat. It’s dead, but it has some distinct tooth marks on its neck.” Sakurako-san says, as she pulls the box Tsun’s corpse is in out of a bag. I can hear her opening it from behind me while I make the tea.

“Looking at the tooth markings, it looks like it has I3, C1, P4, and M2.”

“Then it’s not a cat, cats have M1.”

“Oh, cats have more space between their premolars and canines.”

The water starts to boil. Their conversation just sounds like an incantation for a spell to me.

“M1? Dental formula?” I ask, delivering the tea to both of them.

For a moment, they both look at me with an expression that says ‘you really don’t understand this?’ I want to ask why they won’t tell me. Sakurako-san pulls me closer by my shoulder. I spill a bit of tea on my hand, which burns my thumb. I put the burn against the cold desk to cool it down a bit.

“The dental formula shows how many of which type of teeth an animal has. This is a model of a female chimpanzee, but the number and shape varies for different animals. Dogs have 42 teeth, while humans and chimpanzees have 32. Cats have 30.”

Sawa-san pulls a plastic model of the jaw bones of some animal out of the mountain on his desk, carefully trying to avoid causing an avalanche.

“When examining tooth markings, you have to look at each side of both jaws individually, so there’s four parts in total. The teeth are labelled in order by incisors (I), cuspids (C), premolars (P), and molars (M). That’s what we call the dental formula.” He taps the teeth on the model with his pen while he explains. He follows along each type of tooth. “So, cats have M1. In other words, they only have one back molar. There’s marks from two molars left on this cat’s corpse.”

“Then she was attacked by a dog after all?” I ask. Sawa-san grumbles, “do you think so?” and tilts his head to the side.

“A dog…” Sakurako-san makes her fingers into a triangle and thinks.

“Miss, do you know a dog’s dental formula?” Sawa-san asks Sakurako-san.

“It’s I 3/3, C 1/1, P 4/4, M 2/3.” She answers effortlessly. It sounds like it was as easy to answer for her as telling someone what the weather is like today.

“So this could be… the upper jaw of a dog.” She continues. “Am I wrong?”

“I don’t know. But I feel like the dentition is too orderly to be a dog’s. It could be a similar species, like a tanuki. A tanuki’s dental formula is I 3/3, C 1/1, P4/4, M 3/3. Sometimes, certain individuals will be missing their second back molar. The canine tooth is too wide, and tanuki tend to have less orderly front teeth.”

“Still, it’s hard to think that a tanuki would attack a cat in the first place. Besides kittens, I’ve never heard of a tanuki killing a healthy, adult cat.”

Sawa-san puts on gloves and takes a look at Tsun.

“That’s right, there’s still something bothering me.” Sakurako-san pulls out her own gloves from her pocket and snaps them against her wrist. “Look, there’s claw marks.” Her glove-covered fingers touch Tsun’s thigh.

Sawa-san looks at where she’s pointing, and brings over a razor. He gentle shaves the area with his large, rough hands. His gentleness suddenly brings back memories of my grandma. It reminds me of when her body was being prepared for the funeral.

“Sharp… looks like a scratch.”

Whether it’s from what happened with Tsubaki-san this morning, or the sad look on Kougami’s face, I’m starting to feel strangely sentimental today. I shake my head to clear my thoughts, and turn toward Tsun’s body seriously.

“Boy, how many scars do you see?”

“Huh?” Sakurako-san suddenly asks me a question. “Uhh… five?”

On Tsun’s exposed skin, there’s 5 distinct scars next to the cuts. It looks like the claw mark of a stereotypical monster.

“It’s strange,” Sawa-san mutters.

“Strange?”

“Ah, these aren’t dog scratches.” Sawa-san’s forehead wrinkles.

Sakurako-san nods, and traces Tsun’s scars with her finger.

“Is that so? Perhaps this happened at the time of the attack… the marks are definitely side by side. As you can see from this mark, the nails were flat rather than curved.”

“But dogs have five nails, don’t they?” I remember that Sakurako-san cut Hector’s nails recently, so I’m confused.

“They do. However they have a dewclaw, in other words, a thumb. It grows higher up the leg, so it wouldn’t have left a mark. Besides, dog nails are slightly rounded. In terms of species, and foxes are similar… However, I have a hunch it wasn’t that either. Dogs and tanuki have poor use of their front paws. If they were trying to hold their prey down, I don’t think they would leave marks like this. In other words, whatever killed this cat had dexterous use of its hands.”

“Dexterous hands… like a monkey or something?”

It reminds me of Edgar Allen Poe’s ‘The Murders in the Rue Morgue.’

“No. Apes, at least, have 32 teeth, which doesn’t line up with the marks on this cat.” Sawa-san shakes his head.

“Then, we’re looking for an animal with a dental formula of I3, C1, P4, M2, five fingers, and dexterous hands…”

“That’s right.” Sakurako-san nods. I see Sawa-san start to smile.

Once she notices where he’s looking, she raises her eyebrows and says, “I see…”

“-I see, so that’s why you brought this cat to me.”

“Yes, I thought you might have an idea.”

“Even I can’t be totally sure just from looking at the scratches and tooth marks, but we can try looking at a real specimen.”

“Do both of you know what kind of animal attacked her?!” I ask in surprise.

Sawa-san goes to the shelf, and comes back with a sticky packaging material about as big as a fist. Sakurako-san carefully takes it and unwraps it. Inside it is the skull of an animal.

“Let’s see. Notice how the canine teeth are sharp and quite long. Also, unlike dogs, they have the same number of molars on the top and bottom jaw.”

“This is the skull of the same type of animal that attacked Tsun-chan…”

“I 3/3, C 1/1, P 4/4, M 2/2, their front teeth are close together, they have 5 dexterous fingers – it had to have been a raccoon.”

“A raccoon?!”

“Raccoons can use their hands more dexterous than canines. Their nails are flat. It helps them climb trees.”

“Are they… really such vicious animals?”

I’m completely shocked. It was a raccoon. Sure, I’ve heard stories about them damaging crops, but I have a hard time imagining one killing and eating a living cat.

“No, these tooth and claw marks do look like they were done by a raccoon. However, raccoons don’t normally attack cats. You sometimes hear about it in foreign news, but it definitely isn’t a normal situation.” Sawa-san says to me, seeing how I’m having a hard time believing it.

“Raccoons are definitely dangerous animals, given their violent temperament and sharp teeth. They’re completely different from the charming characters in classic anime. However, I can’t imagine one attacking a cat on its own. I think it would take an extreme emotional response for that to happen. For example, anger, or fear… or hunger, or a combination of things.” Sakurako-san says, sitting at the steel desk and lovingly petting the skull.

“Did the raccoon have to attack it intentionally, or could a person have made it attack the cat?”

“A person…” A chill runs up my spine.

“That’s right… as the young lady said, if it was starving in a cage, or agitated, there’s a chance that it may have attacked a weakened cat.”

“Look at this cat’s paw. The wounds are narrow, and both of the front legs are cut deeply. I don’t think this is from an animal, it’s an unnatural wound.”

Sakurako-san places the skull on her knee, and points to Tsun’s front paw. Sawa-san parts the fur on the paw to check for a wound. His brow deeply wrinkles.

“…There’s one thing that bothers me. On the tooth marks, the canines look unnatural, like they were shaved. It’s the same width as a raccoon’s, but their teeth should be sharp, since they’re meant to be used to bite into flesh.

“Shaved canines… does that really happen?” I ask Sawa-san.

“It does in pet raccoons. Since raccoons are so dangerous, especially their canine teeth, owners sometimes round them out to prevent serious injury. Some owners also have them declawed with surgery. If you don’t, it’s dangerous to keep them in your house.”

“No way…”

Deep down, do people really think they should keep a pet if all of that is necessary? Having your teeth shaved and nails removed so you don’t cause harm to humans seems like torture.

“Although I do think that attacking a cat is strange. It doesn’t happen in the natural world. Someone did it intentionally. As Sawa-san said, the canine teeth do appear to be shaved, so I think it was probably a pet, or an individual kept as a specimen.”

I start to feel sick as I listen to their conversation. Putting an injured cat in a cage with a starving raccoon – it’s disgusting.

“In that case, maybe the scar is from… a time where the cat escaped. I’ll see if the zoo’s raccoon could have left a similar mark.”

Sawa-san takes a digital camera out of a drawer, and takes a picture of the scars on Tsun’s body. Her limbs seem to have loosened after rigor mortis passed, so Sawa-san moves her like a doll. It’s strange. I never saw this cat alive and moving. I’ve never heard her cry. However, at the same time, looking at her body fills my heart with sorrow.

“However one thing I can say is there was likely a third party behind her death… such as a person manipulating the raccoon,” He says in a quiet voice. Sawa-san’s face isn’t showing any expression, but it looks a bit red.

I understand why immediately – he’s definitely angry. The reason is simple, the criminal has done something unforgivable.

“Young lady, once the criminal is found, please be absolutely sure this never happens again,” Sawa-san says.

“…I don’t know if that’s possible.” Sakurako-san answers nonchalantly, but I know. There’s the traces of red nail marks on her white palms are evidence of her anger.

After persuading Sakurako-san to leave the raccoon skull, we leave Sawa-san’s laboratory and take a short detour by the Hokkaido animal exhibit. There’s Ezo owls, Hokkaido squirrels, Ezo red foxes, and other species native to Hokkaido there. Inside, there’s an Ezo tanuki, and a raccoon on display. It seems to have been moved here so you can compare the native and introduced species.

In front of the raccoon are a skull, stuffed paws, and footprints from each animal, displayed in an easy to understand manner. Now that I look at it, tanuki really do have disorderly front teeth and four fingers, while raccoon have organized front teeth, sharp canines, and five fingers.

“The first bone I put on display in Asahikawa was from a raccoon.”

“Huh?”

Sawa-san suddenly speaks from behind me. I turn around to see him looking at the raccoon exhibit.

“Oh, so that’s why.”

“What?”

“This morning we were at the orchard, and while we were talking about raccoons, Sakurako-san suddenly mentioned you.”

Sakurako-san must have a strong mental link between Sawa-san and raccoons. I talk with Sawa-san while we wait for Sakurako-san to use the washroom.

“How many years ago was it… Skeletons are sensitive to ultraviolet light. If you leave them in the sunlight, they’ll eventually become brittle. Before it was put in an acrylic case, it used to be kept in a wooden box that you have to open to look at.”

I look at the raccoon, curled up like it’s ready for a nap. It’s hard to believe that an animal that looks so harmless and cute can be exterminated as a pest.

“But a lot of people who look inside are surprised. There’s been many times where people scream once they look inside. The box broke after just 3 days from people slamming it shut in surprise. That’s why it was changed to an acrylic case.” Sawa-san tells me with a bitter smile.

I’ve gotten used to bones over the past year, but I guess it’s surprising for people who aren’t around them as much. I guess it’s not surprising that visitors would be shocked, especially children. One year ago, I probably would have slammed the lid shut in surprise, too. Now, I can look at them closely. Even if I think skeletons are terrible, they contain a lot of information about how living animals support themselves. Suddenly, I feel like I have to ask him a question. I’m worried it’ll come off as rude, but my curiosity wins in the end.

“Sawa-san… These are the bones of animals you took care of, aren’t they?”

“Does it seem heartless?”

I wonder how many times he’s been asked that. Sawa-san reverses the question back at me without even hesitating.

“No. I was just wondering… If it’s hard for you.”

Sawa-san glances at me, then takes a deep breath. “It’s definitely not easy… but I don’t think I have a clear answer yet.”

Seeing him answer so sadly just makes me more curious. Sakurako-san had no problems with making skeletal specimens out of animals she raised. However, I don’t think Sawa-san is the same. If it’s painful, why does he make them into skeletal specimens? I still want to know, but he doesn’t say anything for a while. I start feeling like I shouldn’t have asked in the first place.

Sawa-san suddenly mutters, “that’s right It might sound weird, but… deep inside, I like to think that I’m giving them a second chance at life.”

Whether it’s so he doesn’t show his expression, or to sort out his feelings, Sawa-san covers his face with both hands and takes a deep breath.

“Bones send a message, even after death. Animal can continue to tell me things after they die. Lately, I’ve been feeling like I actually want to work with bones.” His enthusiastic voice comes back, sweeping away my needless anxiety.

It seems like he has already figured out his answer. Sawa-san looks at me. “I can’t continue on being sad all the time. Since I take care of animals, I have to learn from death. If I’m always apologizing to the dead animal, I won’t be able to connect with the next one. That why I want to- no, I have to learn. One death can benefit the next life.”

“Death can change… the next life”

That's the viewpoint on life and death from someone who both raises animals and assembles their skeletons. He sounds like he has a much clearer perspective than me, but I still I feel like I can understand it. At least with Sakurako-san I can feel some kind of distance, but it's not the same with Sawa-san. I don't know why, but I feel relieved. I feel like I've always wanted to hear those words from someone.

"…There are many people who make specimens. For some people, like Saurako-san, bones are bones, just dead things that are completely unrelated to life."

"…"

Sawa-san looks at me, and we stay silent for a little while. I'm a little worried about saying anything. He soon turns to look at the crowd, then looks back at me.

"She… thinks of bones as being the final form of living things. However, she knows well that a life that's been lost can't come back. By the way, are you in high school now?"

"Huh? Oh, yes."

Sawa-san notices Sakurako-san in the crowd and quickly changes the subject. Maybe he just doesn't want to talk about this with me anymore.

"If you ever want to learn about specimens, contact me. If you have time, I'm always happy to teach. There's a much easier way than simmering it in a smelly pot. All you need it air, a water tank, and heat. You can even do it in your own home, if you have the equipment."

"Oh, no, I'm not really interested in learning about assembling skeletons."

"Really?" Sawa-san grins.

"Hm? What?"

"There's two types of people. People who can stay calm around a corpse, and people who can't. I think you're one of the former."

"I-I'm really not. I don't stay calm at all."

"No, you're just not used to it yet. The latter can't get used to it, even after seeing a corpse over and over again. Finding corpses off-putting is instinctual, but aren't you fine with dead animals now?"

"I guess you're right…" I answer, a bit confused. Sawa-san says, "you'd be cut out for it."

What an annoying misunderstanding. I shake my head to refuse his offer. It seems like fun to talk about animals with Sawa-san, but I don't want to learn about assembling skeletons.

"Being part of the former is rare. You better make the most of your talent."

"I don't want a talent like that, though."

"You don't want to? Aren't you a man? Haven't you ever made plastic models? Bones are the same, just a hundred times more interesting!"

"I don't want to!"

Sawa-san suddenly puts me in a headlock and ruffles me hair. Sure, I've made plastic models before. My older brother, who has moved away now, used to build cool plastic cars or scale models that I was always envious of as a child.

"Anyway, you can email me anytime. I can even offer you advice about love."

"What?"

As I fix my bangs that have been messed up, he hands me a white business card. I take it from him. It has the Asahiyama logo on it, his full name 'Eiji Sawa', and his email address.

"Let's go, we can't keep her waiting."

Sakurako-san comes back from the bathroom. Sawa-san leaves, waving and saying, “let’s talk again sometime.”

Part 5

Sakurako-san looks a bit grumpy, even though she’s listening to her favourite singer in the car. It seems like she wanted to take home that raccoon skull.

I ask her, “don’t you already have one?” in an attempt to calm her down, but it doesn’t seem to help.

“…Well let’s get rid of the cat first. The owner lives in Nankou. Utsumi might know something. Harming animals usually leads to other crimes.”

“Then do you think they might have harmed or killed other animals, Sakurako-san?”

“I can’t deny the possibility.” Sakurako-san says in a disgusted voice. She may like dead things, but she doesn’t wanting living creatures to die.

“Then do you think the stalker… was Tsubaki-san’s boyfriend?”

I remember Tsubaki-san saying that he was persistently asking to move in with her. I also know that he works at a pet shop, and sometimes brings home animals. I feel like it wouldn’t be surprising if he had a raccoon.

“You should email him with what Yuriko said, along with the picture the ex-boyfriend took.”

“That’s fine, but what if you got yourself a phone? At least a tablet. They’re really convenient.”

She ignores my question. I message Kougami and ask her for the picture the ex boyfriend took. It isn’t long before two pictures come in to my phone. I was worried Utsumi-san would be off today, but fortunately, he’s at the police box. I slide open the door a bit and say, “hello…” Once he notices us, he smiles.

“Oh, what is it? Did you find another corpse?”

“It’s actually a cat.“

“Really?”

Sakurako-san responds to his joke with a serious reply. Utsumi-san looks upset. He probably doesn’t like cats, even if they’re dead. He isn’t a fan of animals.

I greet the officer at the desk next to his, then sit in the chair that Utsumi-san gestures to. The walls of the police box, no, the desk as well, are always covered in various posters. There’s posters with mugshots of wanted criminals, traffic safety, photos of missing people, posters about crimes… there really are a lot. Doesn’t being surrounded by all these words make Utsumi-san feel overwhelmed?

“It looks like my acquaintance’s pet cat was killed…”

“Killed…? So it was unnatural?” Once I mention that word, Utsumi-san’s expression quickly changes.

“Boy, the picture.”

“Ah, right.” I take out my phone as Sakurako-san said, and open the folder with the pictures. Sakurako-san takes the phone out my hands without hesitation.

“Utsumi, is this man familiar?” Sakurako-san asks while turning the phone toward Utsumi-san.

“What? Is this guy taking peeping photos?”

He shows the photo of the man with the camera to his coworker, who has a strange hairstyle. He looks like a kappa, or a mushroom.

“Now, where is it?” Sakurako-san messes with my phone again, and shows Utsumi-san.

“Huh…? Ah, that guy!” After a short pause, Utsumi-san’s expression stiffens. “H-hey! Yasui!” Utsumi-san calls over another coworker. Calling him was unnecessary, since this coworker called Yasui was already looked over Utsumi-san’s shoulder.

“Isn’t this guy… the DV guy?” Yasui-san mutters in an unpleasant tone. (NOTE: If you’re slow on the uptake like I am, DV stands for domestic violence.)

“What?! Are you sure?!”

“Yeah. I know him well. I think it was last year? He was suspected of abusing his lover. He was reported several times, so we were in a rush.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. In the end, I think she got a restraining order, but he was still obsessed with her for a while, so she moved about six months ago. I haven’t heard anything about him recently… That guy is seriously bad news.”

“He used to work with animals, but I think he’s a freeter now. He committed violence against the women he went out with, and mooched off their money.” Yasui-san and Utsumi-san say one after the other. “There’s no mistaking it. Tell your acquaintance to be careful.”

The door rattles, and a boy who seems to be in grade 2 or 3 walks into the police box. The child is crying, and his left cheek is red. He says that a man stole his game, but when he tried to resist, the person hit him. Yasui-san and Utsumi-san hurry to help the boy. Sakurako-san starts to leave the police box.

“Um… Thank you very much!”

“I’m sorry. Since it isn’t urgent, could you wait a little while?” Utsumi-san says to me as I try to chase after Sakurako-san.

It seems like they’ll need to check the files about him. I bow and say, “I’ll come back later,” as I leave the police box.

As soon as I sit down in the passenger seat, Sakurako-san drops my phone on my lap.

“Oh.” I set my phone to silent while we were in the police box, so I’m only getting the notifications now. “Oh, it’s from my brother.”

I answer the phone and hear, “when I used to handle chickens, they would sometimes have bite marks and scratches just like that.” He hung up before I could even thank him.

“Let’s go to the owner’s house.” Sakurako-san says after I tell her about the scratches. She starts heading to Tsubaki-san’s house.

When we arrive, she greets us with an exhausted expression. The room seems oddly quiet and still without cats running around in it. She breathes a sigh of relief that we came back. It seems like she was worried about being alone. We return Tsun’s body, and tell her that we had to shave part of her. It seems like she doesn’t care much about that. She takes the box and leads us into the living room.

There's a frayed towel placed on a warm spot next to the window, like a small altar. It must have been Tsun's favourite place to lay. She places the box there. She also has a can of cat food, a shiny cat toy, a scratching post, and scented candles made to look like incense sticks around the spot. Sakurako-san seems impatient about waiting for this farewell ritual. She sighs and leans against her elbow. I'd like to reveal her ex's true nature to her as soon as we can.

"We're going to have a pet funeral tomorrow." Tsubaki-san says, then asks us, "would you like some tea?"

Sakurako-san replies with, "no need, we'll be leaving soon."

Tsubaki-san looks sad about that.

"Anyway, do you want to know what attacked your cat?"

"You mean it wasn't a stray dog?"

"That's right, it wasn't a dog. It was a raccoon."

I don't know if the answer is satisfying for her. However, it does seem to be unexpected. She repeats it a few times to herself.

"A… raccoon?" She says. Her brow furrows, she seems to be thinking hard. She looks a bit like Kougami when she makes that face. "A raccoon… Now that you mention it, Kenichi-kun once mentioned he had to go to the hospital after a raccoon at the store bit him."

"Yes, their canine teeth are very sharp, and they're dangerous."

As I thought, her ex-boyfriend had to deal with raccoons in his store. I feel a familiar pain in my chest.

"While it was a raccoon that killed your cat, we think a person may have been involved in it."

"A person?!" Tsubaki-san's expression turns grim in an instant. "A person… in other words, someone used a raccoon to attack Tsun?"

"Probably."

"No way…" The blood drains from Tsubaki-san's face, and she shuts her mouth tightly. Anger, shock, hatred… her emotions are all mixed up.

Somewhere in my heart, I feel like it would have been better if it were just an accident. At least then we wouldn't have to figure out who it was. Tsubaki-san becomes overwhelmed, falls to her knees, and covers her face.

"You can cry later. You also said that you wanted to talk to the criminal. Do you still want to?" Sakurako-san crouches on one knee so she's at eye level with Tsubaki-san, and asks her calmly.

"Yes, of course. I can't just accept this meekly, for Tsun's sake! I will definitely make it up to her!" Even though her tear stained face is red with anger, Tsubaki-san's strong tone of voice sudden returns.

Sakurako-san sees Tsubaki-san's anger, and narrows her eyes for a moment. "Then let's go," she says. She leaves the house with Tsubaki-san. The city of Asahikawa has become quiet in the short winter days.

Part 6

“Where are you going? Isn’t it the other way?”

I thought we were going to Tsubaki-san’s ex-boyfriend’s house, but when Sakurako-san’s car passes a bus stop, I realize we’re going in the opposite direction. With what lies ahead, Tsubaki-san fixes her makeup since she was crying. I realize we’re on a different road, and look around wondering where we are.

“There’s somewhere I want to go first.”

“Somewhere you want to go?”

We get into Sakurako-san’s Kangoo, and stay confused for a while until we reach the Toyooka veterinary clinic.

“Kariya veterinary clinic?” I feel like I’ve heard the name somewhere before.

“This… is Sudou-kun’s clinic.”

“Ah, that’s it.”

No wonder it seemed familiar. Sudou-san would have told us the name when he introduced himself. Tsubaki-san lets out a relieved sigh. It seems that Sakurako-san plans to have Sudou-san accompany us. It certainly would be safer to bring him, but is it really okay to interrupt him during work?

“Didn’t you bring your cat here before?”

“Yes, I used to, but since the veterinarian that I visited made his own business, I started going there instead.”

We don’t go in right away, since Tsubaki-san is hesitant. However, Sakurako-san ignores her and heads inside anyway.

“Sakurako-san!” I chase after her. There isn’t much for Tsubaki-san to do other than follow us.

Kariya clinic is relatively large. It seems like it’s been open for a while now, so the design isn’t very modern, but it looks clean and the waiting room is spacious. The only person in the waiting room is an older woman with a small dog on her lap. The woman at the reception desk notices us and says, “we’ve finished taking patients for today.”

There’s a notice on the counter with the hours. It seems like they’re closed on Wednesdays, and although they do examinations on weekends, they close at 3pm.

“Is the AHT named Sudou here?”

“Pardon?” The young woman looks at us with a slightly confused expression. She says, “please wait here for a moment,” then disappears into the examination room.

“Is something wrong?” A short, middle aged man with front teeth that resemble a rodents comes out.

“We wanted to ask if a man named Sudou is working here today.”

“Why?” The man’s name tag says ‘Kariya’ on it. He seems even more displeased than the receptionist.

“Is he here?” Sakurako-san asks again.

“If you have an issue with him, he doesn’t have any relation to this clinic anymore!” Dr. Kiriya’s face turns red with anger.

“What do you mean?” Tsubaki-san asks while hiding behind me.

“Ah, so you don’t know. He was moved to Iwasaki-kun’s clinic,” Dr. Kariya replies in a slightly bitter tone. “Sudou resigned from here last month.”

“What? Why?” Tsubaki-san and I ask at almost the exact same time.

“Was he fired?” Sakurako-san asks. Dr. Kiriya grins.

“Please call it voluntary retirement. How should I say it… his interaction with the affected animal wasn’t appropriate. Additionally, he got his hands on some medical supplies and equipment.” Dr. Kariya’s shrugs his shoulders.

“Why didn’t you report it to the police?”

“I didn’t want to turn it into a big deal.” Sakurako-san asks, but Dr. Kariya seems be getting annoyed.

Perhaps there’s another reason why Sudou-san was fired. I notice that the woman from the reception desk is glaring at us with an angry look on her face.

“You should have reported him,” Sakurako-san says, sighing.

“In that case, Sudou-san might have been the one who killed the cat.”

“Huh?!” Everyone freezes upon hearing her words.

Sakurako-san leaves the clinic, unaware of how she made everyone feel.

“You should have said something if you thought that was the case!” I wish I could say, but I’m too hungry right now. Even with an air freshener, the scent of animals from the clinic still hangs in the air. That scent coupled with my hunger makes me feel a bit sick.

“Well, let’s go to Sudou’s house.”

“What’s wrong?! Please explain!” Tsubaki-san seems to be feeling even worse than me. Her face is pale and she looks tired.

“What are we doing here?”

“Isn’t the one who killed Tsun-chan the ex-boyfriend? Or the stalker?”

“I don’t remember saying that,” Sakurako-san says casually.

“But…”

So Tsubaki-san wasn’t only being targeted by a stalker, but also her boyfriend.

“How do you know?”

“There were many factors, but the most important one was the raccoon’s shaved canines.” Sakurako-san gives me a quick glance that tells me my questions are a bother to answer before she speaks.

“Huh? Didn’t Sawa-san say that just meant it was a pet raccoon?”

Also, raccoons were sold at the pet shop the ex-boyfriend works at. Raccoons have spread throughout Japan as a pest.

“I thought someone had bought it.”

“No, it wasn’t.”

“But-“

“They can’t be sold anymore.”

“Huh…?”

Sakurako-san lightly pushes on Tsubaki-san’s back to tell her to get in the car, and says to me, “In June of 2XX5 it was made illegal to import or breed raccoons. So I was thinking. Did the criminal capture the raccoon on their own, get a captured raccoon, and did they shave the canines themselves. Usually when raccoons are captured, they’re brought to a veterinarian to be euthanized.”

“So, then..”

“Sudou is an AHT. Don’t you think he could have captured a raccoon and treated it himself?”

Tsubaki-san sits in the back seat of the car, and Sakurako-san closes the door.

“And besides, I’ve had a strange feeling about him since the beginning. When he entered the room, he didn’t smell like a medical professional. Clinics have a very particular scent. The scent of cresol is quite strong, but he didn’t have it.”

“Now that you mention it… he smelled like perfume,” I answer as we both climb into the car. Now that I think about it, the whole room smelled good when Sudou-san came in. I thought it was a nice smell, but Sakurako-san thought of something completely different.

“Odour is also a necessary part of diagnosing a patient. Animals have especially sharp senses of smell. There’s scents they like, and scents they hate. The perfume he was using was jasmine and citrus scented. Dogs aren’t good with the scent of jasmine, and both cats and dogs hate the scent of citrus. Aren’t veterinary clinics main patients dogs and cats? At the very least, it’s not a scent an AHT would use while treating animals.”

“I wonder… if that’s why my cats didn’t like Sudou-kun,” Tsubaki-san mutters. I’m at a loss for words, and can’t refute.

“…I’ve never been in Sudou-kun’s room before. He’s always too embarrassed since it’s messy. So… even if he was keeping a raccoon, I wouldn’t have known.”

I look at Tsubaki-san in the mirror. She’s biting her lip and staring out the window.

“But… why would Sudou-kun do that? I would never expect Sudou-kun to kill Tsun. Sure, he may have had to leave one clinic, but he’s moved to a different one. I don’t want to think of him as a criminal just because of that.” She says, leaning her head against the window. She’s probably feeling pretty worked up right now. “…Well, it is true that he’s lied to me.” Tsubaki-san sighs.

“Let’s go to Sudou’s house. We can hear his story there.”

Sakurako-san gets his address from Tsubaki-san, and puts it into the navigation system. Nobody speaks until we arrive at the house. The only sounds in the car were the navigation system’s robotic voice, and the sound of the song playing. I wanted to break the car radio.

Part 7

Sudou-san’s apartment isn’t very far from Tsubaki-san’s place. It isn’t very far from where Kougami found Tsun’s corpse, either. No, actually, it’s a bit far. However, looking at a map, it would be a straight line from Sudou-san place. It was in a place where someone could have dropped the corpse off on their way to the convenience store.

His apartment is on the second floor of a small, older looking building. The paint on the rusted railings is peeling off from all the hands running over it, and the stairs are steep. When we arrive at Sudou-san’s apartment, he greets us with anger rather than surprise.

“What do you think you’re-“ He starts to say, but once he notices Tsubaki-san behind us, his expression stiffens. “Tsubaki-san? Why-“

“Why aren’t you at work?” Tsubaki-san says forcefully, before he gets the chance to finish his sentence.

“I was worried about you so I haven’t left yet. I was just about to get changed.” Sudou-san makes up an excuse. We all know it’s a lie.

Tsubaki-san shakes her head and starts to cry upon hearing him lie again. “I know… you’re lying. We were… just at the clinic.”

“The clinic?” Sudou-san’s face turns pale.

“Yeah… why? Why did you lie?” Tsubaki-san asks in a faint, pained voice.

“No, rather, why are you investigating me? It’s the same thing!” Rather than answering her questions, Sudou-san becomes enraged, and raises his voice.

“What’s wrong with looking into where your boyfriend is working? Hey, why did you resign from the clinic? Why did you hide it?” Tsubaki-san lowers her voice, seemingly noticing that we’re still standing at the front door.

However, Sudou-san responds by shouting “I couldn’t help it! It was hard for me to say! The doctor made many false accusations, he basically forced me to quit! Tsubaki-san, did you know that when I asked Iwasaki-sansei why he quit and made his own clinic, he said a fight with Kariya-sensei was the main reason?!”

“That- Is that so…”

“Moreover, Kariya-sensei was spreading baseless rumours that I stole equipment, and treated the animals poorly! That’s why I decided to move to a new clinic. I didn’t talk to you about it because I didn’t want you to misunderstand or worry about it!”

“Then…”

“The real reason I was fired was probably because I saw one of the nurses, Horikawa-san, and Kariya-sensei having an affair after we closed. If you think I’m lying about their relationship, ask Iwasaki-sensei. I think he was also aware of it for quite a while.” Sudou-san spits out like he’s talking about something truly foul.

Tsubaki-san and I coincidentally look over at each other at the same time.

“You… really didn’t do anything to get fired?”

“Of course. I do think I should have told you about it, but… I didn’t want you to see how horrible that place was.”

“Ah…” Tsubaki-san covers her face with both hands. She seems relieved.

We had been under the impression that Sudou-san was the culprit because of Sakurako-san. However, I understand Sudou-san’s side of the story. No, since I’m always around people older than me, like Sakurako-san, I understand it all too well. Even if he doesn’t take the blame, even if he did it out of worry, he still feels terrible about it. He had to lie to try to protect her. Now that Sudou-san’s name has been cleared, I look at Sakurako-san. I give her a frustrated expression. She needs to explain her reasoning.

I try to speak, but Sakurako-san makes an arrogant grin. “Can we go inside?”

“Huh?”

“I want to check in your room.” Sakurako-san says rudely. She tries to force her way inside the room.

“Sorry, but I can’t let you in.” Sudou-san says, spreading his arms across the door.

“Why not?”

“Why not… What do you even want to do?” Sudou-san says, annoyed.

I get between the two of them and say, “let’s just go home.” However, Sakurako-san gives me a sharp glare and says, “don’t get in my way.”

“Let’s talk a bit about the cat. After a bit of investigation, it’s unlikely that a stray dog killed her. I think it was probably a raccoon.”

“It couldn’t be! Raccoons don’t attack cats.” Sudou-san says with a small laugh.

“Are you sure? Well, I collected a saliva sample from the corpse and sent in to a university for a DNA analysis. This way, we can know for sure if it was a dog or not. After I investigated the animal that attacked her, I thought things didn’t line up. The saliva samples showed to contain a virus in the rhabdovirus family, in the lyssavirus genus.”

“Huh…?” Sudou-san’s smiles quickly fades. “No, it can’t…”

“Rhabdo…?” That’s a word I’ve never heard before.

However, Sudou-san seems tense. His thoughts are obvious from the way he’s trembling.

“Have you heard of rabies before? You may have heard of mad dogs, but humans and other animals can contract it, not just dogs. It infects mammals equally. Humans are no exception. The scariest part of it is that it can’t be cured. Once symptoms start appearing, there’s an almost 100% chance of death.”

“100%?!”

After she mentions rabies, I realize what she’s talking about. However, this is my first time hearing that it can infect humans, and that the mortality rate is so high.

“It… It couldn’t have been rabies! Japan hasn’t had any reported cases since 1957!” Sudou-san tries to use his medical knowledge to refute Sakurako-san’s point.

Sakurako-san shrugs her shoulders. “Yes, I was surprised to see that, too. However, raccoons aren’t Japanese animals. They’re an invasive species from North America. In fact, in America, humans sometimes die of rabies that they contracted from raccoons. There’s no conclusive evidence that it hasn’t appeared in Japan. An animal infected with rabies may not show symptoms for several years.”

“It couldn’t…” Sudou-san’s face turns pale and he leans against the door.

Sakurako-san narrows her eyes at him and says, “it’s strange. This shouldn’t have any relation to you, right? You shouldn’t be worried about the possibility of rabies… Unless it’s because of the raccoon you’re keeping here? After all, this virus was found on the corpse of her pet cat. Shouldn’t it be completely unrelated to you?”

“I… I do have a pet raccoon. Still, it didn’t attack Tsubaki’s cat. I was worried because Tsubaki might have gotten infected from touching the cat-“ Sudou-san says, his eyes wide open. His expression quickly turns from surprise to anger. “-No, it can’t be. Testing for rabies should take at least a few hours. There’s no way you could’ve gotten the test results back that fast.”

“That’s right.” Sakurako-san shrugs her shoulders and smirks. This only heightens Sudou-san’s anger.

“H… How could you lie about that?!”

“Well, why did you get so worried about it? Was it so surprising that it caused your pupils to widen?” Sakurako-san laughs. It seems like she insulted Sudou-san. She sure lead him along. I guess that’s why I didn’t know what she was talking about.

“I always doubted you.”

Sudou-san glares at Sakurako-san.

“No, I don’t doubt you. That’s because I’m confident that you murdered the cat.”

“Sudou-kun… you couldn’t have actually…” After hearing Sakurako-san say it so bluntly, Tsubaki-san looks like she wants to get away from Sudou-san.

“You’re wrong! Tsubaki-san, do you really trust this stranger more than me?!”

“But…”

Even though Sudou-san is desperately pleading, Tsubaki-san hesitates, and looks between her boyfriend and Sakurako-san. There’s no doubt about which one she believes, but she still seems to be thinking about it.

“Everything you’re saying is pointless. A little while ago, I confirmed your photo at a nearby police box,” Sakurako-san says. However, the photo she showed to Utsumi-san should have been of the stalker.

“Huh? Then the photo that Kenichi-san took was…” Sakurako-san just looks at me and grins.

“Ah!” I finally realize. The distance measuring app. I open the pictures folder on my phone to see that before the two pictures Kougami-san sent me, there’s a picture of Sudou-san standing in front of the window at the apartment.

“So the stalker wasn’t Kenichi-san, but Sudou-san all along?!” I accidentally start shouting. Sakurako-san finally lets out a big laugh.

“The officer at the police box remembered you. It seems he not only remembered your face, but also that you’ve been accused of DV and stalking a woman.”

Sudou-san’s face turns pale and sweat forms on his forehead. He looks at Tsubaki-san.

“…Certainly, I admit that there was a time where I did some things that aren’t very praiseworthy. But that was all in the past. I’ve changed plenty since then. She was part of my old life, but now I’m starting a new life!”

“Specifically, how long ago did you start being stalked?” Sakurako-san asks Tsubaki-san while ignoring Sudou-san desperate pleas.

“I don’t remember exactly, but I think I first started to feel like something was off about half a year ago. It’s wasn’t definite or anything, It might have just been my imagination…”

“Since your relationship with this man began, did the stalker’s activity decrease at all?”

“Yes… I just thought that it was harder for the stalker to interfere with him around .” Tsubaki-san puts a bit more distance between herself and Sudou-san. She wants to believe in him, but her suspicion wins in the end. She glances between Sakurako-san and Sudou-san.

“Isn’t that because he could see into your room directly? You had carelessly left your phone on your desk. If he had the key, he could check your mail without damaging the mailbox. He could have even placed a wiretap-“

“Stop scaring her with your made up nonsense! I didn’t do any of that! First of all, didn’t the guy from before make silent phone calls?” Sudou-san slams on the door in irritation.

Tsubaki-san and I both jump with surprise. Sakurako-san stays so calm that she doesn’t even lift an eyebrow. It’s almost like she finds his anger amusing.

“It seems like her former boyfriend still has some attachment to her. Isn’t that just a coverup you were hiding behind?”

“No! It really isn’t like that! Tsubaki-san!” Sudou-san shouts, reaching towards Tsubaki-san. He tries to grab her. Tsubaki-san pulls away from him by reflex. She hides behind my arm in fear.

“Ah…” At that exact moment, I almost feel like I can hear something snap inside of him. “Ahhhhhhh!!!!!” Sudou-san lets out a strange yell, and kicks the door repeatedly.

“Did you kill the cat because it was an obstacle getting between you and this woman? What made you go that far? Why was that your first thought?!”

“It was easy to kill it!” Sudou-san shouts. “I hated that cat! It was loud, and reeked of urine, but its owner would still pet it. It lacked any kind of discipline!!”

“Sudou-kun… You really did kill her…?”

“It was just getting in my way! It deserved to die! At first, I thought it was cute! But that thing never liked me! I don’t want to be looked down on by a stupid animal!” Sudou-san kicks the door again.

Sudou-san steps toward me with a violent look, but his anger would probably better directed to Sakurako-san.

“I was also with the raccoon! Although it looks like a stuffed toy, it’s not very well trained. Well, at least it’s better than a cat. Every time I went into Tsubaki’s room, that stupid cat would be loud, annoying, an eyesore, and generally terrible!” He turns to Sakurako-san. The corners of his mouth start to foam while he continues to yell. “Since she was as annoying as the raccoon was hungry, I just threw her in the cage. That cat tried to scratch my legs and fight back. Even my raccoon got covered in scratches!”

“How cruel…” Tsubaki-san squeezes out a strained voice and wipes her tears. Her voice is full of sadness and hatred.

“If killing the cat is a crime, then isn’t hurting my raccoon a crime, too? If you arrest me, shouldn’t this woman be arrested as well? Or rather, I’m the victim here. That cat caused me a lot of trouble!”

“What a heartless thing to say!” Tsubaki-san finally runs out of patience, and shouts.

“Shut up!”

“Ahh!”

Sudou pushes me out of the way and slaps Tsubaki-san across the cheek.

“What do you think you’re doing?!” Tsubaki-san staggers into one of the apartment pillars. She turns away from Sudou and starts running down the stairs.

“You’re not getting away!”

Tsubaki-san, Sakurako-san, and I try to escape while Sudou pursues us. The railing has left a small wound on my hand, but that doesn’t stop me from using it to jump down the stairs. However, Sudou is faster than me. He gets down the stairs before me and disappears into an alley.

“Crap!” A few seconds later, I follow him down the street.

“L-let go!!”

“Ah-“

When I open my eyes, I see someone yelling at Sudou. Two police officers are blocking Sudou from escaping.

“Hey, Shou-chan. Long time no see.”

“U-Utsumi-san?!”

The officers are none other than Utsumi-san and Yasui-san.

“Well, it’s been a long time, Sudou-kun.”

Sudou tries to escape, but Yasui-san grabs his arm and pushes him against the hood of the police car. It looks like a scene out of a movie.

“Where did you come from?” They came at the perfect time, but I still don’t know why they’re here in the first place. Sakurako-san and I never mentioned that we were going to visit his apartment.

“Oh, the people in the room next to Sudou reported that they heard a man arguing with a young woman.”

“Huh?”

“The other day, Sudou was arguing with the delivery man, so we told the neighbours to report it if the hear anything.”

“Oh… I see.”

We certainly did make quite an uproar at his front door. The one who made most of the noise was Sudou himself, too.

“I told you to let go of me!” Sudou yells and tries to break free.

“Woah there, that hurts. You’re attacking me now?” Yasui-san says with a happy grin to Sudou-san.

“I didn’t touch you!”

“No, no, you have it all wrong. You just hit me.”

“This is a false accusation!”

“No, you did. I was definitely hit. Isn’t that right?”

“Huh?”

Officer Yasui suddenly asks me.

“He’s right, this guy did hurt officer Yasui. Him and I were watching closely.” Sakurako-san answers before I have a chance to speak. I turn to see Sakurako-san standing next to Tsubaki-san, who has one red cheek.

“Isn’t that right~? Well, I wonder if you should come with us to deal with some official business, hahaha.”

Officer Yasui ropes me into their discussion, still pushing Sudou into the police car with a smile.

“You’d better let go of me! This is completely unrelated!”

“Woah, scary. It’s a threat this time, huh?”

While listening to the conversation between the two people behind me, I rush over to Tsubaki-san.

“…Are you okay?”

Her expression is stiff, but she nods. Sakurako-san says she should go to the hospital since she hit the back of her head. Utsumi-san also told her she should submit a damage report. However, Tsubaki-san doesn’t seem to be listening to them. In the police car, Yasui-san and Sudou seem to be arguing about something, probably his punishment.

“Huh?”

“-Big sister…”

“Big sister? You mean Kougami’s mom?”

“Yeah. My big sister always says that I don’t seem to have an eye for men, and I’m unlucky with them. She said that I would suffer if I chose based on appearances – I’d hate to say it, but she was right.” Tsubaki-san lets out a self-deprecating laugh. “I didn’t think he was like that… not only Tsun, but Yuriko was also in danger. Maybe it really is my fault that Tsun died.” Tsubaki-san adds, and hangs her head.

“That’s wrong,” Sakurako-san says decisively. “It was that man who killed her. There was no reason for her untimely death.”

Tsubaki-san seems to understand the significance of Sakurako-san’s words, including her kindness. She forces herself to smile at Sakurako-san, then turns away from us to hide her tears.

“Ah!” Tsubaki-san notices something, and quickly shouts. “That person, the camera,” she says, pointing with her finger.

Looking past the crowd of people who have gathered due to the police sirens and commotion, I see a man standing there. I vaguely recognize him.

“Peeping photo… guy?” Hazy memories start to connect in my head. The picture Kenichi-san showed us. That’s the man that was taking the picture. His body is solidly built, and his short hair is slightly wavy. His face is square… He’s wearing jeans and a jumper, but he somehow has a strange presence.

“Wait!”

“Tsubaki-san!”

Tsubaki-san shakes us off and runs.

“Why are you here?!”

“What?”

Tsubaki-san grabs the man’s hand. “Why were you taking pictures through my window?” She takes out her phone and shows it to the man.

“This is you, isn’t it?! What the hell were you doing?!”

He seems surprised by Tsubaki-san’s anger at first, but an apologetic expression appears on his face. “Oh, I’m sorry… I didn’t intend to take a picture of your room.”

“What do you mean?”

He hesitates for a moment before he bows his head to Tsubaki-san. “I wanted to take a picture of the cat.”

“…The cat?”

“Yes. I take pictures of cats I meet and upload them to my blog. That time, I was probably trying to take a picture of a cat that was by the windowsill,” the man says.

Tsubaki-san quickly does something on her phone. “Then maybe… This was the cat?”

“Oh, yes! Does that mean it was your cat?” The man looks delighted for a moment before returning to his apologetic expression. I wouldn’t really expect someone so tall and muscular to have a hobby of taking pictures of cats… I guess there’s all kinds of people in this world. “I thought it was too clean to be a stray, but it also didn’t have a collar… I’m sorry for taking pictures without thinking first. That cat was so lovely and beautiful, it was love at first sight. If you don’t mind, could I please come take pictures again sometime?”

“That…”

The man speaks in such a bright tone, but Tsubaki-san's expression is still cloudy.

"I'm sorry. I don't want to say it, but that cat isn't around anymore."

"Huh?"

Tsubaki-san doesn't say anything to the confused man. Once he sees the tears in her eyes, he seems to realize what she means.

"I'm… sorry to hear that." The man hangs his head, awkwardly scratching behind his ear. The two of them stay silent for a while until the man mumbles, "I'm really sorry… She looked at me with such composure that I felt like she could hear my thoughts. When I tried to take a picture, she would seemingly intentionally turn away from me."

"Yeah, she was a bit anti-social." Tsubaki-san smiles with tears still in her eyes. "She wasn't a very cuddly cat, since she used to be a stray, but… When I was feeling down, she would always come try to make me feel better. She was a really nice cat."

Final part

Sakurako-san looks bored while she watches the two grieve over the cat. She probably wants to go home soon.

"Still, Sudou-san really was suspicious." He definitely did do a lot of suspicious things. Still, I'm always surprised by her deductive reasoning skills.

"He… Sudou didn't examine the cat."

"Huh?"

"Even though he was an AHT, he never bothered to examine his girlfriend's deceased cat. He just tried to comfort her."

I look over at Tsubaki-san. The man listens to her stories about her pet cat, the two of them crying.

"I don't especially like cats. When Ulna and Ray died… This reminds me of how he and I were both sad." Sakurako-san says with a lonely smile. It's a memory that I haven't experienced.

I let out a sigh. My breath forms a white cloud. The sun has already gone down, and since it's October, it's starting to get cold. It'll start to snow in about a month.

"…Isn't it cold?"

"Well, it is already October. Of course it's cold." She gives a short answer.

Even if she has a long sleeved knit shirt, she must be colder than me without a jacket on. Before he leaves, Utsumi-san puts his parka over Sakurako-san's shoulders, then turns to look at Tsubaki-san. I hope Tsubaki-san doesn't catch a cold out here.

Second Bone: When I Get Married

Part one (NOTE: this chapter is from Kougami's perspective, it wasn't as obvious when I translated it to English)

The pancakes at Tsubaki-chan's favourite Hawaiian café are very delicious. The white interior feels like the sandy beaches of Hawaii, it has a refreshing, clean atmosphere, and the heart shaped coffee cups are cute. The arrangement of the food is always nice, so when we stay at Tsubaki-chan's house, we always have dinner and late breakfast – or rather, early lunch-here. That's why I invited Tatewaki-kun here for the first time in a while. Eating a whole stack of pancakes, topped with caramel sauce and cream, always makes me happy.

"I thought it was a lot of food, but it looks like we'll be done in no time."

"The fresh cream is light, too, so it's unexpectedly easy to eat a lot of."

We're eating our usual 3 o'clock snack. I wonder how they make these pancakes so delicious?

"These really are delicious, I should tell Sakurako-san about this place," Tatewaki-kun says.

He always talks about her. Sometimes it's a bit annoying, but I don't want to hurt him by saying anything about it.

"You should, I'm sure she'd be happy."

I understand how he feels. I'm always happy to see Sakurako-san, too. Her smile is beautiful, and she can switch from being scary to cute.

"Then let's invite her next time. She could get the tower pancakes, it's a tall stack of them." Tatewaki-kun looks at the picture on the menu and laughs.

He keeps shovelling pancakes into his mouth. He always eats so neatly, never talks with his mouth full, and he always scoops up the last bits of cream or sauce so there isn't any left. He cleans up all the food on his plate so neatly that it looks like there was never anything on there in the first place. He uses his chopsticks so skillfully that he must have started learning how to use them when he was young. Sometimes he uses phrases that are a bit old fashioned, so it can be confusing at first.

I always felt like we had an affinity, since we were both close to our grandparents. He doesn't mind when I talk about the past. When I talk about my grandma with my mom, she always looks sad, but sometimes you need to talk about and remember the people you loved so you don't forget them. Even though I loved my grandma, I can't remember her voice or eye colour right away anymore. There's still plenty of times when I want to see her again so badly that it makes me want to cry.

"…Has your aunt been okay since that incident?"

"Huh?"

Tatewaki-kun suddenly speaks to me while I'm lost in thought.

"Oh… She's doing well. I've been worried about her, too."

Tatewaki-kun and Sakurako-san solved the case surrounding Tsun's death only two weeks ago, however, Tsubaki-chan doesn't seem to be feeling as depressed as I expected, so I'm not too worried. It seems she's been busy at work for these past two weeks, but my mom

says it's better than her sitting around and feeling sad. I wonder if she's making herself busy on purpose so she doesn't have time to feel depressed?

"It seems Sudou-san has had a lot of trials, but she wants him to pay for his crimes, so she's doing her best."

Even after the shock of finding out her boyfriend was stalking her, Tsubaki-chan is still moving on. However, I think the anger of Tsun's death hurts more than the heartbreak. Why would someone who seemed so nice, like Sudou-san, kill an animal? I don't think I'll ever understand.

"But it doesn't seem like it's going to be a harsh sentence."

"I see… I'm worried." Tatewaki-kun's face turns cloudy.

I hope he gets sent somewhere far away, so I never have to see him again. It would be horrible if something happened to Tsubaki-chan again.

"But you know, you should feel relieved, since there were happy endings, too."

"Happy endings?"

"Yeah, for example, the camera guy… his name is Tabata-san. Now him and Tsubaki-chan… they're getting along."

"Really?"

After the incident with Tsun, Tabata-san printed out a picture of Tsun and sent it to Tsubaki-chan to help cheer her up. Since they're close now, Tabata-san helps keep Tsubaki-chan's ex boyfriend away when he tries to visit her.

"They seem to be getting along, but I'm not sure about everything… but my mom says 'he's a good person now', but I still think Tsubaki-chan relies on him too much."

"Well at least it gives you some peace of mind. He must be a good bodyguard."

"Huh?"

"I mean, doesn't he do judo?"

"…How do you know that?" I'm surprised that he could say that so casually.

"My grandpa had the same cauliflower ear. To be precise, it's the auricle becomes swollen and blood can accumulate around the end from rubbing against the floor during pinning techniques."

"I see… I had no idea."

He doesn't stand out much compared to Sakurako-san, but Tatewaki-kun can be surprisingly sharp.

"But I'm honestly glad that everything turned out fine. Even Sakurako-san was a bit concerned. She asked me, "How is Yuriko doing?" I'll be sure to tell her," Tatewaki-kun says. He looks like he suddenly remembered something, and stares at me.

"…Speaking of which, did you meet Sakurako-san for tea before?"

"Huh…? Oh, I went out to buy a chiffon cake for the anniversary of my grandma's passing. I ran into her and asked her if she wanted to go get the afternoon tea set since we were nearby."

"Oh, the one with the cakes and scones and stuff."

"Yeah, we ate them together."

The shop puts a bunch of cakes, scones, and sandwiches on a cake stand with tea. I feel like ordering it every time I pass by.

“I wanted to try a bit of everything.”

It was a bit expensive for us, so we tried to limit ourselves, but it seemed like Sakurako-san wanted to get even more. I knew it would be good, but it was even better with Saurako-san there to talk to. Tatewaki-kun always talks for her, so that was only the fourth time I’ve gotten to talk with her directly. I was worried about the time, but Sakurako-san offered to drive me home.

“But Sakurako-san… Isn’t really the most talkative person.” I remember how quiet it was in the store and try to force a smile.

“Ahaha, she’s kind of indifferent to things she isn’t interested in. She can go on and on about bones, but she isn’t very good at normal conversations,” Tatewaki-san says with a happy expression.

“But still… Even if it was quiet, it was fun.”

Honestly, that’s a bit of a lie. I was confused at first, and it was a bit awkward, so it wasn’t all that enjoyable.

“When I was talking about my grandma, Sakurako-san seemed to have an interest in it.” Tatewaki-kun says, grabbing his fork.

I feel a bit jealous, so I spend some time sipping my café au lait to make it go away.

“…Your grandpa’s paintings.”

“Painting?”

“When she used them to solve the case with your grandma.”

Part 2

“You want to find a painting?”

I finally get a reaction from Sakurako-san when I was just about to give up on getting her to talk to me. I start to feel nervous, so I sit up straight in my chair.

“Oh, yes. I want you to find one painting in particular that my grandpa drew.”

She raises her cup to her lips and urges me to speak with her other hand.

“I think… it was on my 12th birthday. My grandma told me that when I grew up and got married, my grandpa had a picture he would give me as a present.”

It was after the celebration, when we were washing the dishes together. By that time, I was already taller than my grandma. She kept telling me how amazed she was while we were washing up. I wasn’t a little girl anymore. I helped my grandma wash the dishes and wipe the table on my own without being asked or needing help. She suddenly said that to me as she was putting away the last of the dishes. I can still clearly remember the picture of children under cherry blossoms that was on that bowl.

“Marriage is still a long way off.” I was really surprised by her talking about something that far away.

“Even If you say that, time flies by quickly.” My grandma didn’t smile, she just slowly shook her head.

“Still, a picture? Which one?” I asked, but she didn’t answer that question. She only gave me a slight smile.

“After all, it was supposed to be a secret until that day comes.”

Sakurako-san puts down her cup and leans back in her seat.

“Still… With my grandma gone, we’ll never know which one it is. I could ask my grandpa, but he probably couldn’t tell me anymore…”

Any time someone brings up my grandma with him, he starts crying. Even if he can hear me, I doubt he’d understand what I mean. Lately, he’s been stuck thinking that I’m still a kindergartener, so when he sees me he just thinks I’m another caregiver.

“But still… I want to know what that picture was. That’s why I wanted to ask you if you could try finding it.”

She could figure out that Sudou-san killed Tsun, and that my grandma died in an accident after the police ruled it a suicide. Sakurako-san stays silent for a bit while she finishes her tea.

“Then let’s go now. I can’t guarantee that I’ll find it, but I can take a look.” She stands up and gives me an elegant smile, then leads me to her cute car.

Part 3

It isn’t really inconvenient, but I didn’t expect her to come over right away. She walks straight through my room and into the kitchen. I wonder if she wants a drink. She drank tea earlier, and I don’t think she likes coffee. She didn’t seem to mind the jasmine tea at Tsubaki-chan’s house. I wonder if she’d be happy with juice? However, in the fridge there only seems to be yukijirushi coffee and soft katsugen.

Troubled, I pour some slightly orange katsugen into her glass, and put in 3 ice cubes. I love the fermented milk drink that’s said to be the soul drink of the people of Hokkaido, but I don’t know if Sakurako-san likes it.

“Um… I’m sorry, there’s only sweet drinks,” I say as I walk into the room with it. Fortunately, Sakurako-san says, “no problem,” and takes the glass. “I’ll bring the paintings in now.”

I leave the room by myself and get my grandfather’s paintings from the storage room. There’s big ones, and small ones. All together, there’s around 40 of them.

“Is there anything else left behind? You knew your grandma best.”

“Ah, yes…”

I’m already breathing heavily after making 6 trips back and forth to the second floor. It seems I haven’t been getting enough exercise lately. This time, I carry four boxes of my grandma’s belongings into the room.

“This is it, sorry. We asked an expert for help, but it isn’t so easy to get rid of most of these things…”

The room is completely full of stuff. Sakurako-san is in the centre, looking at a picture in a box with a serious face.

“Um… would it be better if we left you alone.”

“It doesn’t matter. You can do whatever you want.”

“Ah, right…”

However, there's no space for me and I don't know what to do. I want to be able to answer her if she needs anything, so I sit down on my bed. I try to read a book for a while, then use on my phone, but it feels wrong somehow. I don't know how to spend my time. I wish I could at least ask Sakurako-san some questions… It can't be helped, so I sit and hold my knees on the bed. Suddenly, there's a loud noise. It looks like Sakurako-san opened one of the boxes upside down.

"…Sorry."

"It's fine, I don't mind."

Fortunately, it was mostly just paper inside. They're just letters, New Year's cards, books, etc. that have been sent to me, so it's not a problem to handle them roughly. Soon, Sakurako-san picks up the last one. It's a crumpled piece of paper.

"That's embarrassing… It's a picture I drew when I was little. It was when we went to Lake Mashuu. I drew it next to my grandpa."

I was only in first grade at that time. Sakurako-san stares at my drawing for a minute, then pulls one of my grandpa's paintings of the same lake. She says, "you seem to have gotten the main points down. You aren't bad," with a mischievous smile.

"No, I'm sure it's just because my grandpa was teaching me. I'm usually not that great at drawing…"

I'm not just trying to be humble, it's actually true. I'm fully aware that I don't have any talent when it comes to the arts. My dad in particular always seemed to have a great sense for arranging food. I'm sure this picture is important to my grandma, and I guess it's good for something I drew… but next to my grandpa's paintings, it doesn't look so great. I put the two paintings on my desk. Since my grandpa had a stroke, that trip to Lake Mashuu was the last trip we took together.

Sakurako-san picks up one of my old letters and looks at it. Even if she's just trying to find the picture, it's still embarrassing. Sakurako-san finally comes out of my room after an hour.

"How did it go?"

She only replies by muttering, "hmm." She takes the letters out of a cardboard box, then carefully places them back inside. She nods at me and says, "I see…"

She crosses her arms and looks at the paintings that are arranged on the floor. Eventually, she picks up one of the pictures. It's a picture of two horses, running side by side.

"You grandmother seemed to be quite familiar with old songs and poems," she says, looking at the box. Following her line of sight, she seems to be looking at an 8th century anthology of Japanese poetry book and a stack of karuta cards.

"Yeah. I remember that she likes it. On New Year's, we always play karuta."

"One poem in the book goes 'If I buy a horse, still my wife must go afoot. Let us be content, though we walk upon the stones, we two shall be together.' The poem is saying that if a man bought a horse, his wife would still have to walk, so he wouldn't take the horse as long as they could walk together."

"Walking together…"

"That's right. It's saying that they'd rather walk together, even if one of them doesn't have to. She was probably trying to say that even through hardships, a couple with a close bond can still be happy."

“Oh…” The corners of my eyes start to sting.

“Your grandmother has mentioned that she likes horses. Your grandfather might have painted this picture to make her happy. Or maybe he put his feeling for his wife into this picture. A picture to convey his love.”

I slowly pick up the horse painting. This picture certainly does capture their feelings for each other.

“Then, is this the picture?”

“It could be, but it’s only one of the candidates,” Sakurako-san says, grabbing another painting.

“This one… is a painting of a lily. Like your name, Yuriko. (TL NOTE: Yuri = lily) Of course, the flower is in your name, but the casa blanca lilies in this painting represent magnificent love, compassion, and glory in the language of flowers. They’re also known as ‘the king of lilies’ and are often used in weddings. I think it would be a fitting gift to give you on your wedding. It would also make a nice decoration.”

The painting is of a lily in a large vase. I’m sure this painting would look lovely if it was hung up.

“…”

Still, just like the horse picture, this one doesn’t seem to fit right. Sakurako-san looks at the two pictures, then goes to my desk again.

“There’s one more.”

“Huh?”

The picture of Lake Mashuu was there just a minute ago. Sakurako-san looks at the picture I drew one more time and smiles, then grabs one of my grandpa’s pictures.

“This painting…? Why?”

“You said this picture is of Lake Mashuu. This small island in the middle… Did you know that it’s called Kamuishu Island?”

“No…”

“In Ainu, kamui means god, and shu means grandmother.”

“Grandmother?”

“There’s a sad story to this island. A whole clan was slaughtered. However, one old woman managed to flee with her grandchild… But they got separated on the mountains. She searched for her beloved grandchild before she finally collapsed on the lake shore. Her body became the island. When people visit, it’s said that she’ll think her grandchild came back, and it’ll rain with her tears.” Sakurako-san gently places her finger on the island in the middle of the lake while she speaks.

“What a sad story… but why would my grandma give me a picture with such a sad meaning?”

“Even if she has become an island, it’s still a picture of a grandmother thinking about, and waiting for, her grandchild.” Sakurako-san smiles calmly. “Time passes quickly. She wants to be with you forever, even if she can’t. You grandmother has watched you grow, and no matter what, she’ll keep watching over you with unchanging love. It’s possibly she gave you this picture with those thoughts in mind.”

Sakurako-san hands me the picture. The blue lake, green mountains, and the island. I also place my finger on it softly.

“Besides, your grandmother watched you draw the same picture, side by side with her husband. It may be a symbol of that happy, relaxing time.”

“Grandma’s island…”

“So, out of these three, which do you think is the one your grandma really chose?”

Although the pictures of the lily and horses are beautiful, I think it would be nice if it was the picture of Lake Mashu. Sakurako-san sighs quietly at my question.

“Let’s see… I’ll tell you my conclusion now.”

“Right.” Even though I haven’t heard the answer yet, I still gulp.

“I don’t know.”

“What?”

“It’s as I said. I can’t figure out which picture your grandma was going to give you.”

For a moment, I can’t understand her words.

“But… what about these paintings?”

“That’s just a possible meaning I thought of. I can find as many of those as you want if it’ll make you believe that it was ‘grandma’s present’. However, I don’t want to fool you.”

“…I… I see.”

That’s surprising. Really surprising. I’m so disappointed that I forget to even thank Sakurako-san for helping me. I bury my head in my knees. Somehow, I thought it would be fine no matter what she ended up saying. I’m not disappointed in Sakurako-san… I just thought that if I could find out which painting my grandma wanted to give me, I’d be really happy, but all I’m left with is disappointment.

I suddenly start crying. I know it’s rude, but I can’t stop it. But… But if Sakurako-san doesn’t know which painting it is, who else would? Sakurako-san sits down next to me, without getting angry. Once I stop crying, I take a sip from my drink. Sakurako-san hands me a box of tissues.

“…I read your letter.”

“Letter?”

“The one you sent to your grandmother. It was thanking her for letting you stay over your winter vacation, and how happy the Christmas present you got was. The present was a dress up doll and a number of outfits.”

“I think… That letter was from my first year of middle school.”

Why is she suddenly bringing that up? I wipe my tears away, struggling to understand what she means.

“‘Thank you for the present, grandma. The doll has so many of the dresses I wanted most, and I’m looking forward to making some myself, too…’ was what it said. I guess you really liked that doll.” Sakurako-san laughs. “But be honest. Were you really happy to get that doll?”

“Huh?”

“Was that really what you wanted?”

I struggle to answer.

“Umm… Of course I was happy to get a present from my grandma.” I give a slight nod, but Sakurako-san laughs again.

“So what you’re saying is that you wouldn’t have been happy if the present wasn’t from your grandma.”

“Umm…”

“It’s natural. Middle school girls don’t want dress up dolls anymore.”

She hit the nail on the head. I would have been happy with dolls like that if I was still in elementary school. Honestly, I wanted her to send clothes or books.

“That’s… Uhh… It’s just…”

“I can understand many things from this letter. First, you used to go to your grandma’s house. You would usually stay for longer periods of time, rather than shorter visits.” Sakurako-san finally begins to speak. It was unbelievably quiet, like a tea house.

“Yes, when I was in elementary school, if I had a break of three days or more, I would go to my grandma’s house. Since my dad was always busy with work, and my grandparents were so kind, I wanted to stay at their house every day.” Answering her questions brings back nostalgic memories. “But when middle school started, I had club activities, and often went out with my friends, so I couldn’t go visit…”

Besides, it also became more difficult to go after my grandpa collapsed. As a child, I didn’t care as much, and I didn’t want to help take care of my grandpa, so as I got older it became… a little annoying.

“I think that year I only went for a few days during the Obon festival.”

“I see. So your grandma didn’t notice you had changed. They didn’t realize their little grandchild who was delighted by a doll had already become a young woman. Children grow up fast.” Sakurako-san nods slowly.

Perhaps… she’s right.

“However, this letter doesn’t show any of your displeasure. It only praises the doll. You’re close, so you could have written about other things you would have liked, but you didn’t write anything like that.”

I gulp.

“Your grandma’s happiness is your happiness.”

“…”

“That’s why your prioritized your grandma’s happiness over your own. That’s why you gave the forced answer of ‘Of course I was happy to get a present from my grandma’ earlier. You love your grandmother from the bottom of your heart, so you were fine with the contents of the present. Pleasing your grandma made her happy, which made you happy.”

I thought I would be accused of being an ungrateful grandchild if I wasn’t happy with my grandma’s present. My chest feels tight upon hearing Sakurako-san’s words in her soft voice.

“Umm…”

“Your grandmother really loved you. I’m sure you feel the same way. I can understand that much from this letter. That’s why your grandmother didn’t throw away any of your letters,” Sakurako-san says, taking a number of letters out of a cardboard box. All the letter that I sent, written on stationery with popular characters on it.

“Your deep affection for each other wasn’t just from blood relations alone. It was the result of strong, mutual feelings between both of you. There’s so many memories you shared together. It’s the result of countless experiences, both good and bad,” she says, sitting down

next to me again. “Your grandmother chose one picture to give to you that captured that deep love. I can’t just guess which one it was. Perhaps it was a secret or a promise that only you and your grandmother knew about… So I apologize. I can’t find the painting.”

My eyes fill with tears. It’s a shame, but… She’s right.

“Of course, if you want me to convince you, I can think of some reasons. Choose your favourite picture. Then I will give you a reason to think it’s the right one.”

I shake my head, still crying.

“That’s right. I don’t think that would make any sense.”

“I understand… Thank you so much…”

I understand how Sakurako-san feels, so I want to thank her. Still, I can only manage to say those few words. I still feel overwhelming sadness when I think about how much I miss my grandma. I miss her so much that no matter how much I cry and bury my face in my pillow, I still can’t stand it.

“…But I’m still disappointed.”

Sakurako-san suddenly puts her hand gently on my shoulder.

“There’s probably one person who knows the answer.”

“Huh?” I lift my head in surprise. She slowly nods.

“That’s you. I think that when the time comes, you will find the picture you’re looking for.”

“…Me?”

“Yes. It might just be wishful thinking, but… I do believe that you’ll find it. I’m sure that your memories will slowly piece together, one by one, and lead you to the answer.”

“Sakurako-san…” She brushes a tear off my cheek.

“Don’t you still have plenty of time until you get married? It’s fine to slowly search for those memories. There’s no reason to rush. It took over 360 years for Fermat’s last theorem to be completed,” she says. Something about her words makes me feel like everything will turn out fine.

Final part (NOTE: this isn’t from Kougami’s perspective anymore)

“I still can’t find the painting, but… I don’t feel as impatient as I did before. I feel like I really will find it one day,” Kougami says, with a tear on her cheek.

“Still, you seem to be pretty close with Sakurako-san lately,” I say with a smile, even though I actually feel envious.

I’m still surprised that Sakurako-san started calling her by her first name. I’m a bit annoyed, actually. Though, I am glad that Sakurako-san could give such a kind solution to Kougami’s troubles. I’m sure Kougami would find the answer eventually, even without Sakurako-san, though she still has to deal with the heartache until she finds it.

“Huh? You got a painting from Kougami?” I ask. I don’t really get it, but I can somehow tell it’s from her.

“Yes, it was a present to thank me. It’s alright, if it turns out to be the painting her grandmother was going to give her, I promised to return it.”

“That’s nice. So… What’s the painting of?” Kougami smiles.

“A plum tree.”

“A plum? Not a cherry blossom tree?”

Why a plum tree? She doesn’t even like pickled plums.

“…Huh? Tatewaki-kun, do you not know?” Kougami looks at me in surprise.

“What?”

“You didn’t know that gran’s name is Ume-san?” (TL NOTE: Ume = plum)

“What?!”

This is the first I’ve heard of it. I guess plum trees and cherry blossom trees are both beautiful to look at. In Hokkaido, they both bloom at the same time.

“Oh… I had no idea…”

I try to think of the right thing to say. While I hesitate, Kougami takes the strawberry from my pancakes that I was saving until the end and tosses it in her mouth.

Third Bone: The Butterfly that Vanished in November

Part 1

The fall is rushing by. A friend of mine who moved here said, “people in Asahikawa really like Halloween,” which is probably true. Although it’s a tradition that only showed up here recently, this time of year is always full of delicious fruits and vegetables, so people like to celebrate before the cold winter. Once the black, orange, and purple witches and monsters disappear from the town, winter begins.

The stores put out their Christmas displays, and the snow starts falling halfway through November. Last year the snow came early, but this year, it’s still getting up to 15 degrees even though October ended. The weather report on TV said that it’ll even get up to 20 degrees tomorrow. The news said that it the weather has been abnormal for the past few years, but it’s still almost scary that I can walk outside with only one jacket on.

”A field walk?”

“Yes, I want to go before it starts snowing.”

I was caught by Isozaki-sensei, who wanted to clean his classroom before the semester was over. He offered to buy me ramen for my help. He has the same unbalanced diet as Sakurako-san, and he even said that he doesn’t like katsudon. He's the kind of person says that sukiyaki has too much meat (though he has said he enjoys shirataki noodles.) It seems like he just doesn’t like greasy foods. While I put his offal into my bowl, he asks how Sakurako-san is doing, so I tell him our plans for the weekend.

Horumen is one of the best ramen places in Asahikawa. The soft offal and vegetables on the ramen are delicious. Though they usually use soy sauce, I prefer the miso flavour. The firm noodles, the soft offal, and the crispy vegetables… All three parts taste delicious together. The soup really brings out the flavour of the offal. I can’t help but say, “ah, this is delicious!” This is great ramen.

“Since it’s the end of the year, I’m going out for a while.” I talk to Isozaki-sensei between taking bites of offal. It’s greasy and sweet.

“It’s supposed to be warm until Sunday, so it should be good timing,” He says, moving mushrooms to my bowl.

“I wasn’t originally going to go with Sakurako-san, but gran was worried about her going alone. Sakurako-san doesn’t have a smartphone, after all.”

“What about a GPS?”

Both the teacher and I keep eating while we aren’t talking. The sounds of slurping ramen fill the restaurant.

“Neither of us have one. Should I borrow one from my grandpa?”

“…I could lend you one,” Isozaki-sensei responds a few moments after I ask.

“Huh? Are you sure?”

“In exchange, I want to go, too.”

“Really?”

“I should still be able to see some gentiana triflora.”

“Huh…”

He loves flowers. During the summer this year, he took two days off of school and claimed to be sick, but he was actually waiting to watch a Dutchman’s pipe cactus bloom, which only blooms once a year. He proudly showed off pictures of it to everyone once he came back.

“…Don’t give me that look.”

It seems like I accidentally let my feelings show on my face.

“Now I don’t only have Sakurako-san, but also you to bother me.”

“Am I getting in the way of your alone time with her?”

“No, I just don’t want to deal with two annoying people at once.”

“What? Well how about if I treat you?”

“That would be a different story, but it’s not fair!”

He turns to me with a smirk.

“My wallet‘s right here~.”

How immature… I start to lose my appetite for ramen.

“…Then just make sure you get up early,” I mutter.

Delicious food can be dangerous. I’ll need to make room for it. I finish the last bit of my offal. I’m starting to think that taking Isozaki-sensei with us might be interesting,

On Saturday, a few days after the incident at Horumen, Sakurako-san, my teacher, and I head to the Pepan district, east of Asahiyama zoo, early in the morning. Pepan is the name for the area that encompasses the Toyota, Yonehara, and Mizuho districts. In the Ainu language, Pe-pan-pet means “river of sweet water”, and as you can tell from the kanji, it’s a rice producing area.

In the Meiji area, silkworm raising was popular with the people who had settled there from the Fukushima prefecture, according to Isozaki-sensei. Now, it’s a quiet town with rice fields everywhere.

Today, the temperature is far above what’s normal for this time of year. The sky is clear, except for some thin clouds around the Taisetsu mountain range.

“Look, it’s Gentiana triflora,” Isozaki-sensei says, and points to a grass with a blue flower at the top. The purplish blue flower, green leaves, and red stem create a sharp contrast with the autumn forest.

“Ah… I’ve seen it a few times while climbing at Asahidake. So this is Gentiana triflora?”

I was worried that he’s come here in his usual suit, but luckily he looks like he’s well prepared for hiking. At least he has a bear bell and a GPS… However, Sakurako-san also walks through the forests with dangerously light equipment and she never gets lost. I do wonder if she’s getting chilly. Compared to her, Isozaki-sensei is well prepared. Listening to him talk about flowers is surprisingly enjoyable.

Since I’m mostly looking for flowers, my steps are light. Just like Sawa-san said, I’m not even surprised by animal corpses. That doesn’t mean I’m happy to find them, though. Compared to that, learning about lovely flowers that I don’t even know the names of is very fun, even if I don’t particularly like flowers.

“Still, I didn’t think there would be so many flowers blooming at this time of year,” I say, looking around at everything that has turned from green to brown. It’s the colour of late autumn

and winter. However, in this forest, even though the expected blooming period has passed, there's still flowers scattered here and there.

"Look, there's a Leibnitz daisy by your feet. Another name for them is the purple dandelion. This flower blooms twice, in both spring and autumn. In autumn their stems get longer, and their leaves get bigger," he tells me about the flowers before I even notice them.

Well, more accurately these flowers have already been pollinated and gone to seed. A fluffy white ball, like a dandelion, is on the end of the long, spear-like stem.

Sakurako-san seemed indifferent to Isozaki-sensei's lessons on flowers at first, but she's started listening to them now. Even though she seems to know so much, I guess she still likes learning new things.

"Oh, what's this one? It's pretty."

I notice a small, purple flower when I kneel down to look at the leibnitz daisy. At first I thought it was another gentiana triflora, but the leaves are sharp along the edges, and the flowers seem to be hanging down.

"It would be wise to not touch that."

"Huh?"

Sakurako-san speaks sharply just as I reach out to touch it.

"As Kujo-san said, you shouldn't touch that," Isozaki-sensei says after taking pictures of the leibniz daisy.

"What would happen? Would it sting my hand?" I quickly pull my hand away. Isozaki-sensei shrugs his shoulders.

"It might cause a rash… It's called Aconitum sachalinense. It's the most toxic of the aconitum species, so it's best not to touch it carelessly," he says, taking a picture of the flower.

I'm surprised such a pretty flower is toxic. I step away from it. It sounds weird, but it makes me feel like the poison has seeped into the soil around it, so I don't want to get too close.

"Still, even if it's uncomfortable, it can't kill you," Sakurako-san says, noticing my fear of the tiny plant.

"Don't you have to be careful with Hector around plants like these?"

"The poison in aconitum is indeed contained in the roots, flowers, and pollen. Some plants can even make the soil around them toxic, like oleander, so it's good to be cautious," Sakurako-san says with a laugh. She's just as unkind as ever.

After a while, we start walking again. As the sun rises higher, the sun starts beating down on my back. Sakurako-san suddenly stops walking, and puts her arms out to stop us, too.

"What is it?"

"Stay quiet."

"Huh?"

Sakurako-san puts her finger to her lips, then points to the bushes. I can't figure out what she's pointing at, at first. I strain my eyes, looking over the plants until suddenly I notice something flickering.

"…Is that a butterfly?"

"It's a Diana treebrown. It's unusual to see one at this time."

I speak at the same time as my teacher. It really was a butterfly. However, unlike small whites or swallowtail butterflies, this one isn't brightly coloured or very pretty. Its dark brown

colours blend in perfectly with the fall colours. It looks more like a moth than a butterfly. The only part of it that stands out are the black markings on its wings that look almost like eyes. I normally wouldn't pay much attention to a plain butterfly like that, but instead of just one, there's actually a whole group of them.

"It looks like it's going to snow… Is it because of the unusual warmth during the past week?" I say, as Sakurako-san steps closer to the butterflies. "Sakurako-san?"

Even as she approaches, the butterflies stay close to where they were, without flying too far away. She takes a pair of gloves out of her pocket, and snaps them against her wrist as usual. While I'm staring in confusion, she sticks both her hands into the group of butterflies. The butterflies take flight all at once.

"Ugh…"

I don't know what to say. Sakurako-san happily lifts up the rotting corpse of some animal covered in maggots.

"It's an Ezo snow hare." She gently brushes the bugs off with her hand, then seals the corpse away in a plastic bag. "Butterflies are often thought to only drink nectar, but some will drink sap, juice from rotting fruit, or animal urine. These Diana treebrown butterflies love dead bodies above all else, so I occasionally see them."

In other words, these butterflies were attracted to the corpse. I feel myself disliking these butterflies more and more.

"It's actually said that these butterflies aren't found North of the Aomori prefecture, however this isn't my first time seeing one," my teacher tells me while averting his eyes from Sakurako-san. "This is just my hypothesis, but I think there's many Diana treebrown butterflies in Fukushima. So, when they migrate, they end up in this area together."

"So they migrated…?"

It's just like Hokkaido's history. For a moment, I let my gaze follow the butterflies that are fluttering around in the sunlight streaming through the trees. The butterflies looks even darker in the shadows of the leaves.

"…They're pretty, but a little creepy. I guess I'd call them 'mysterious'."

"Butterflies have been an insect that's believed to have a strong spiritual connection with death for a long time. In Japan, dark coloured butterflies, like spangles and Chinese peacock butterflies, are called butterflies of hell, or paradise butterflies in some regions. Researchers think that the butterfly of paradise was an auspicious thing, and was used in exorcisms."

"Butterfly of Hell…"

Are Chinese Peacock butterflies also attracted to corpses? A butterfly calmly dancing, like a large, black bird, definitely has a sinister feeling.

"But, since you took the rabbit, the butterflies will have to find something else to eat, won't they?" I say, looking at Sakurako-san with the rabbit. Sakurako-san turns around slowly before answering me.

"…Well, they'll be migrating again soon, anyway."

"Ah…"

Oh, that's right. Today is warm, but on Monday it'll be back to being cold every day as usual. In less than a month, everything here will be buried under snow. Somehow, all three of us were silent after that.

We just continue on for a while, with Isozaki-sensei taking pictures of flowers, and Sakurako-san searching for corpses. We start to head back down the mountain, since we've been walking for about an hour already. While we walk, someone's phone rings. At first, I can't figure out what the sound was. It sounds like muffled singing. We all look at each other for a moment.

"…"

It's a ringtone I don't recognize. If it isn't mine, I guess it's Isozaki-sensei's. He realizes what it is and pulls a black smartphone out of the pocket of his jacket.

"Isozaki-sensei?"

He stares at his phone without moving.

"Umm… Shouldn't you pick that up?"

He doesn't answer my question. It stops ringing for a moment after going to voicemail, then starts again.

"Umm…"

I guess he doesn't want to talk to them, or anyone else. He doesn't want to answer a call from that person. The air between us becomes heavy. Why is this person calling him over and over again when he isn't answering? Even if it's just an ordinary device, it almost seems terrifying right now. After all, it isn't like him to not answer like this. He finally takes a deep breath and picks up the call.

"Yes, this is Isozaki."

As soon as he answers, a voice screams from the other end of the phone. I don't know who made that sound, but it sounds like it's probably a girl.

"It's been a while," Isozaki-sensei responds calmly.

"…Huh? Hitoe-san?" His expression quickly changes. "Oh, no, I didn't mean to ignore you – yes, I think so – that's right – I understand – alright."

He keeps responding with similar phrases. At this point, it sounds like the person on the other end has calmed down, since I can't hear the yelling anymore.

"Well, we'll be in touch then."

Eventually he gets off the phone. He presses it against his forehead and looks down.

"Isozaki-sensei…"

I think he might be crying. I wonder if he was fired from his job? I've never seen him very angry or emotional before like this. When he lifts his head, I can see that he wasn't crying after all. I'm relieved, but his complexion still doesn't look so good. I want to ask, "what's wrong?" but it doesn't feel like the right thing to say right now.

"Who was on the phone?" Sakurako-san asks, just as rude as ever.

Even if it seems rude, I'm envious of her ability to be so straightforward.

"It was… the mother of one of my students who already graduated," Isozaki-sensei says, sounding troubled.

He puts his phone into the pocket on his pants, rather than back in his jacket. I wonder if he plans to use it again soon.

"Sorry, but I have to leave. Something urgent came up."

"Wait."

He starts walking away quickly, but Sakurako-san's calls him back.

“How are you going to get home?”

“Huh?”

“If you really want to walk home from here, I won’t stop you.”

“Oh…”

He wrinkles his eyebrows. We came here in Sakurako-san’s car, after all. Isozaki-sensei’s car isn’t fit for Hokkaido winters, especially since it’s a convertible. It’s a cute car, but it’s only a two-seater. That’s why we had to take Sakurako-san’s car.

“…I’ll be fine, I can call a taxi,” Isozaki-sensei says, his voice trembling.

However, Sakurako-san smiles at him.

“Don’t worry. I’ll take you,” she says. She pats him on the back and starts walking.

“But I-“

“The bones aren’t going anywhere. They’re always waiting for me, so I don’t particularly need to find everything today. Besides, I already got this rabbit. That’s enough for me,” Sakurako-san says without looking back.

Isozaki-sensei just says, “I guess so…” With Sakurako-san’s lack of modesty, and the trouble with that phone call, he must be overwhelmed. “…I’ll take your word for it, then.”

He finally makes a decision. Sakurako-san says that she never forgets a road she’s been on once, so she walks quickly without hesitating. She seems to be going faster than usual. It doesn’t take long for us to reach the car, so we end up getting there just after 11am.

“Where should I go?” Sakurako-san asks while climbing into the car and putting on her seatbelt.

“Where? Ah, right… where should we go…” Isozaki-sensei says in a quiet voice, sitting in the passenger seat.

“Isozaki?” Sakurako-san asks him suspiciously, but he doesn’t reply.

I seems like he’s worried about something.

“Um… if it wouldn’t bother you, could I ask what happened?” I timidly ask, finally at the end of my patience.

“…Shoutarou, you wouldn’t know about the “three sisters”, would you?”

“Three sisters?”

He stays silent for a little while before muttering. I don’t know what to do, so I say, “I don’t know about it,” and shake my head.

“One of my students went missing before.”

“Ah… Umm, well”

I’ve heard of that. I’m sure they graduated the year before last. People at school occasionally talk about her. It sounds like she committed suicide due to her home life.

“One of Futaba Nishizawa’s two close friends also disappeared. They met during class change in their second year.” Isozaki-sensei puts his elbow on the car door and rests his chin in his hand as he begins to tell his story. “Hitoe Madoka, Futaba Nishizawa, and Minami Tsutsumi’s names all have a number in them. They started becoming friends and were always together. Since the three of them were always together, everyone called them the three sisters. That shows just how close they were.”

As I listen to him talk, I begin to feel like I’ve heard the name “Hitoe” before.

“Hitoe and Minami were already friends in elementary school, so Futaba was added to their pair. Although they would occasionally quarrel, they always seemed to get along until the day Futaba went missing in the autumn of their second year.”

He sighs. His manner of speaking and expression seem different from usual. It must be because he’s thinking about that group of girls. They would go to the washroom together, do everything together, and they all had matching straps on their bags. Even though they appeared to be close, if one of them wasn’t around, the other two would speak poorly of her.

“It started with Futaba, she was a bit anxious… She seemed sort of unstable. I think she had some kind of trouble. Before she disappeared, her parents got divorced and tried to pick her future career for her. After that… They found a note she’d left.”

“A… note?”

“The school didn’t pursue it, since it was mostly complaints about her family. It seems like Futaba never talked to Hitoe and Minami about it. Those two were completely shocked when they got the news… Well, that is natural. I was surprised, too. I couldn’t do anything, even though I was her homeroom teacher.”

He lets out another sigh. Sakurako-san, who had been silent this whole time, suddenly speaks up.

“Humans who truly wish to die often won’t tell people they’re close to. They don’t want anyone to get in their way, especially those who care about them.”

I think she might have actually been trying to comfort Isozaki-sensei.

“Still… I wish I could have known, even if she hadn’t told me.” He looks down. I can’t see his expression from the back seat, but I can see his eyelashes quivering. “…After Futaba disappeared, Hitoe and Minami started skipping school. Those two always reminded me about Futaba. They kept their distance from each other until they graduated.”

“Then that phone call…”

“Even now, I’m hoping to get a call from someone saying ‘Futaba is alive,’ so I haven’t been able to bring myself to delete the three girls’ parents numbers from my phone. That call was from… Hitoe’s mother.”

“I’m guessing it wasn’t good news.”

Even though I said it myself, I still think that was insensitive of me. Any reason I can think of for someone to call him repeatedly like that isn’t good news.

“…Hitoe has disappeared.”

“What?”

“Hitoe’s mother contacted me. She’s gone,” he says in an unpleasant voice.

I thought he was going to say that Futaba-san’s body was found. Now that I think about it, I remember him mentioning “Hitoe” when he was talking on the phone. That’s why I thought it was familiar.

“Then where is her house?”

“Huh?” Isozaki-sensei and I say at the same time.

“That’s where you were going, right?” Sakurako-san says. Her tone implies she thinks it was foolish of us to ask. “Don’t you want to find her this time? If you do, her house would be your best place to start.”

I feel a sharp pain in my chest when she says ‘this time.’ Isozaki-senses holds his head in his hands and says, “thank you.”

Part two

First, we stop by Isozaki-sensei’s apartment so he can change his clothes. It’s my first time going into his place. We’re asked to wait in the living room for a few minutes. I start to wonder what the so-called “prince’s” room looks like. I bet it’s full of gorgeous flowers.

The area around the window in the living room is covered in flowers. They’re pretty, but it somehow reminds me of Sakurako-san’s house, with her living room full of bones. I wonder why? Being surrounded by such an eccentric hobby like this makes me feel like I’m alone. Yet, somehow, I find both their clumsiness and aloofness to be likeable. I’m envious of it.

I truly wish I had something I loved that much. I always just leave everything half-baked. Somehow, I feel some kind of connection to his love of flowers. Even Sakurako-san, who usually doesn’t care much for taking in the flowery scenery, is crouching down and looking at them all.

Isozaki-sensei eventually returns with a new outfit on. Since he’s wearing his usual suit, he seems calmer and more composed than he was before. I’m relieved. That suit is almost like armour for him.

He grabs an address book and goes to make some phone calls in the car. Unfortunately, he doesn’t find the information he’s looking for. While waiting for the other students to contact us, we head to Hitoe-san’s house.

Even though I didn’t particularly have an image in mind, Hitoe-san’s house is still bigger than I expected. It’s a large, Western-style mansion surrounded by a light brown outer wall, with arches and white benches in the garden.

We’re met by Hitoe-san’s mother. Hitoe-san’s mother looks slender and refined, but she looks exhausted. Even so, Isozaki-sansei looks relieved. We introduce ourselves as a graduate and a current student of the school her daughter attended. I thought she would do something, but she just says “is that so” indifferently. I expected her to be more worried about her daughter than she seems to be.

As expected from the outside, inside the house is a gorgeous, European-style room. Everything looks so expensive. It’s all so glossy and shiny. The room smells more like a hotel or a department store than a home. Other than the raincoat hanging on the wall, it doesn’t seem like a place where people actually live. It just doesn’t have a feeling of life to it. According to Isozaki-sensei, Hitoe-san’s father runs a private hospital.

We enter the flashy living room where a person, who is apparently her father, has returned for lunch. Speaking of which, we haven’t eaten lunch yet, either.
It seems Isozaki-sensei hasn’t noticed the time, either. He apologizes for coming at an inconvenient time. Hitoe-san’s mom offers to make us lunch, but we politely decline.

Her father seems to prioritize talking to guests over eating lunch. Tea and cookies are prepared for us, so we start listening about Hitoe-san.

“Yesterday evening… she left the house and didn’t come back,” her mother says with a pained expression. Her dad seems a little angry.

“Did you check the houses of her friends and boyfriend?”

“My daughter is not the kind of child that would stay out without permission from her parents.” He gives a half-hearted smile, like it’s the obvious response to my question. He’s looking at me like it was a stupid thing to even suggest.

“Well, well,” Sakurako-san says, then snorts and scoff at us.

“Sakurako-san.” I nudge her with my elbow.

“But if you your daughter didn’t sleep over at a friend’s house, where else do you think she could have gone? Is this a case? An accident? You’re playing the part of concerned parents, but have you considered the possibility that your daughter might already be dead?”

“How could you say that?!” Hitoe-san’s mother turns pale at Sakurako-san’s words, and stands up. The sudden movement causes her cup of tea to shake.

“Oh well. However, that’s not all you’ve been wondering about. She also took her pet dog.”

In contrast to her mother’s shocked, pale face, her father’s face is red with anger.

“…How do you know that?” Hitoe-san’s mother asks, fixing her gaze on Sakurako-san.

“In the entrance, there’s a raincoat for dogs. There’s marks from the leash on the coat. They should have been together. However, there wasn’t a leash,” She says, then turns back to look at the garden. “In addition, there’s a water bowl, and an animal bed. So, you keep some kind of animal – perhaps the dog in that picture. It’s a picture of your daughter with a dog.”

She then points to a photo on a shelf that is decorated with high class silverware. Sure enough, in front of a candle is a photograph of a woman hugging a fluffy dog.

“It was taken last month on Mimi’s first birthday,” Hitoe-san’s mother says, and walks toward the shelf with the picture. “This is my daughter, Hitoe.”

Like a mother holding her baby, she hugs the photo to her chest, then holds it out to us.

“Last month, huh… She’s a bit thinner than she was in high school,” Isozaki-sensei smiles nostalgically.

“Isn’t she pretty?” Hitoe-san’s mother asks Isozaki-sensei.

“She’s always been childish, saying nothing but silly things,” her father says with a twisted face.

Hitoe-san’s mother glares at her husband for a moment for talking about their daughter like that, then turns away and ignores him.

“Anyway, I don’t think she took Mimi when she ran away. There’s no signs that she took dog food.” Her mother looks at the photo, and holds it to her chest again.

Surely if you were to run away from home, it would be difficult to take your dog, right? That alone would limit where you could go.

“Is there really no reason you can think of for her to run away?” I ask her mom.

She sighs and drops her gaze.

“…We might have scolded her a bit too harshly.” The mom says quietly, seemingly embarrassed. “It seems like she hasn’t been going to university since summer vacation ended. We didn’t notice because she left the house every day… It sounds like she was going to a part time job instead of studying.”

She says the words “part time job” like there’s something bad about that. Sure, skipping school isn’t a good thing to do, but is working really that bad? My thoughts must have shown on my face, since the dad slams his fist on the table.

“But that girl was a university student. She just had to study and go to school, not work. I scolded her for leaving things halfway done. It’s only natural as a father!” He yells. It seems to me that he was the reason she ran away. “It wasn’t easy to say! We told her that if she didn’t have enough pocket money, she could just say something, but she started to talk back. How could she say that she wanted to leave and be independent?!”

“Do you know the reason why she stopped going to school?” Isozaki-sensei quickly asks, just as the couple begins to argue. “I don’t think Hitoe-san is the kind of girl who would skip school without a reason. Was there some reason she couldn’t concentrate on studying?”

The mom makes a troubled expression.

“No. Well… There might have been something over summer break.”

“Like what?”

“I’m not entirely sure. But… She seemed to have fallen in love with a man.”

“Stop bringing useless things like that up again!” The dad yells at the mom.

“So you’re opposed to that, too?!”

“Of course!”

“U-um…” Isozaki-sensei tries to interject, but they don’t stop.

As the couple continues to quarrel, Sakurako-san loudly clicks her tongue. For better or for worse, the dad’s phone starts to ring, so he grumpily picks it up. Apparently it’s from the hospital.

“Are you sure? Please let me know if you learn anything!”

The dad tells us that he has to go back to the hospital, before even having lunch. The mom doesn’t see him off, she just glares at him as he leaves the room.

“That person… That hospital is more important to him than us.” The mom grumbles angrily. I can hear the sound of the dad’s car pulling away.

Since I only have my mom, I feel jealous of people who have both their parents. Still, seeing them not get along like this makes my chest hurt.

“Even though he said all that, I think it’s because of her lover that she’s been away from school. The rule in our house is that she has to show the receipt after she goes shopping. But of course, my husband wouldn’t let her pay for dates with her boyfriend.” She says it like it’s natural, but Hitoe-san’s parents seem way too strict.

I have to keep myself from saying “I can see lots of reasons why she’d run away.” I look to Sakurako-san.

“Do you think that’s the reason she left?” Sakurako-san asks the mom.

The mom’s gaze drops to the floor, and she slowly nods while hugging the picture.

“Hitoe-chan often takes Mimi on walks at a big park nearby. Yesterday evening, she took Mimi and her bike, so I thought they were just going for a walk, but…”

“But she didn’t come back.”

“Yes. Her curfew is at 7pm. She hadn’t stayed out past her curfew before. She didn’t come back… I thought maybe she’d gotten involved in an incident or something… It was the first time I couldn’t contact her.”

“You couldn’t phone her?” I ask, I thought since her parents are so strict, she wouldn’t have a cell phone. Apparently that isn’t the case.

“The call didn’t connect, so I tried calling her friends that I knew,” The mother says with a discouraged expression.

Isozaki-sensei must have been her last hope. Unfortunately, he also doesn’t know where she went.

“Let’s see her room. Do you know what she brought?” Sakurako-san says abruptly.

“Huh?”

“If we look at her room, we may be able to figure something out from her luggage.”

“I’m not sure… I don’t know if I should let you go in.”

“Based on the contents of her luggage, we may be able to find out where she expected to go.”

Is this because of what Sakurako-san was saying earlier? Hitoe-san’s mother takes a moment to think about where she could have gone, based on what she took.

“Then let me look at your daughter's room and tell you.”

“Ah, alright, it’s over here.”

I glance at Isozaki-sensei for a moment to confirm, then we follow Hitoe-san’s mother to her daughter’s room. Still, she must be hesitant to let men into her daughter’s room. As I enter, she whispers “please don’t touch anything inside,” to me. Sakurako-san, as impolite as ever, enters the room right away.

Unlike the rest of the house, Hitoe-san’s room is full of traces of existence. The white walls have a thin floral pattern, and the white curtains are the same as the lower floor. Her bedspread is bright pink, the desk is black, and the chair is covered in pink oilcloth. I wonder if it’s to rebel against her parents’ preferences? Or is this a normal room for a woman of her age? I wouldn’t know since I’ve never been in the room of a nearly twenty year old woman. There’s no bookshelf, but there’s three closets.

“Do you know which bag she took? I want to know the size of it,” Sakurako-san says. The mother hurriedly reaches for one of the closets.

The closet is big enough for several people to fit inside. There’s so many shoe boxes piled up, it makes me wonder just how many she has. The bag is crammed in there. The mother’s brow wrinkles a bit as she looks inside.

“…I think her favourite tote bag is gone, as well as one of her coats. It was a red trench coat. I guess she needed to dress warmly?”

“A tote bag wouldn’t be able to fit many sets of clothes. Even though it’s been quite warm for the past few days, the nights are still cold. It’s cold enough to need a jacket when you go outside, but you wouldn’t need one that thick for just a quick outing.”

Sakurako-san sits down in the chair and looks at the parents, making a triangle with her finger in front of her mouth. She has a habit of doing that when she’s thinking.

“Can you think of anything else?”

“I don’t think her bag was too overstuffed when she left… She probably took her wallet and her phone, though.”

“Her phone?” Sakurako-san asks, as she stops searching the room and focuses on one spot.

There's a bear stuffy with various accessories and a makeup rack with several items on top. There's a hair dryer, a mobile phone box, a massage roller, a rechargeable mobile battery… She's the kind of person who keeps the instruction manuals for everything, it seems.

"Could you reach that?" Sakurako-san says, pointing to a portable battery on the topmost shelf.

I stand on my toes, but I can only feel the dry rustling of paper. I must be holding a manual.

"This? It's empty, though." I say, as she opens the box without any hesitation. Just as I thought, there's just questionnaires, warranty cards, and a few other pieces of paper.

"…This is probably the power cable. Where's the other part of this?"

There's a power bar on the desk, with only the USB cord by it. Sakurako-san checks the manual, and points out that the USB cord matches the type in it.

"Did she bring it with her?"

I have one, too, that I use when I go out. Everyone looks around the room, but we can't find it.

"Looks like it's not here."

"Maybe she took it with her, as Shoutarou said," Isozaki-sensei says, checking the top of the desk one more time.

Sakurako-san frowns.

"Would she normally carry around something that weighs 500 grams?"

"Huh?"

I check the manual, it does say that it weighs 500 grams. That does seem a bit too heavy to carry around everywhere.

"It says it can be charged up to six times. Would that mean she planned to be gone for a certain amount of time? It's a place where she would need a thick coat, and might not be able to charge her phone. If not, she would have just brought a normal phone charger."

"Then why aren't my calls connecting?!" The mother refutes.

"Even if she isn't making phone calls, she could still use apps… I hear that your battery is used up fast when you're outside of your service area, or the signal is unstable. So maybe she's in a place where the signal is unstable? Otherwise…" I mumble, hesitating.

"Otherwise what?" Hitoe-san's mother urges me on.

"Um… It's also possible that she has blocked you, and…"

"Blocked…?"

I mumble and squirm. She stares at me in disbelief. After looking at Sakurako-san and Isozaki-san behind me, she drops her knees to the floor. Both of them seem to have been thinking the same thing, since neither is denying it.

"…After all, she ran away from home, didn't she?"

"That possibility can't be denied. Of course we'll search for her, but she isn't a high school student anymore. I think she most likely has relationships that even her mother doesn't know about," Isozaki-sensei says quietly.

"But… where could that girl have gone with Mimi…? You said it was a place where she needs a coat and there's no electricity, right?"

"She could have just been preparing for the time she'd have to spend outside."

The mother sighs disappointedly at Isozaki-sensei's words.

"But that means it probably wasn't an incident or an accident, right? That's a good thing." I say to comfort her.

"What's good about that?! You mean my own daughter betrayed me?! How embarrassing!" As her anger increases, the mother begins shouting at me.

I notice Isozaki-sensei's expression become distorted for a moment.

"…O-of course, that doesn't mean that you shouldn't hope that she comes back safely… I know it must be surprising for you. You tried to raise her with so much care…" He quickly tries to patch things up. The mom bites her lip.

However, the air between us is already cold. Isozaki-sensei stays silent for a while, then opens his mouth to speak again.

"What about Minami… Have you tried contacting Tsutsumi-san's place?"

"Yes, but the phone didn't connect. It said that the number was no longer available. Also, she doesn't talk much with Tsutsumi-san anymore." The mom says, but her tone seems strangely unkind.

"Well, we should head out soon. If we stay here much longer, the sun will go down," Sakurako-san says, getting up from her chair and heading straight to the entranceway without even waiting for us.

We follow after her.

"Anyway, we'll look for her, and contact you if we find anything," Isozaki-sensei says politely.

Behind him, Sakurako-san leaves and closes the door.

"…I'm going to wait another night, too. I will go to the police if she doesn't come back tonight," the mom says, giving a weak nod.

"And… If you find her, please tell her I'm not angry. If she goes to university properly from now on, we won't say anything about it."

I can't help but wonder if that's really what she would want to hear. We leave Hitoe-san's house, into the cold air.

Part 3

After phoning two other graduates, we settle down for lunch. We want to get something we can have quickly, so we go to a self service sanuki udon shop. It's Sakurako-san's first time at a shop like this. She doesn't understand how to order, so I get kamaage udon for her. Even more surprising is that she doesn't understand how to eat the noodles properly.

Speaking of which, when we have soumen in the summer, she seems to have a hard time with her chopsticks. Apparently they don't have noodles much at her house. Even if she's not having a good time with the noodles, she seems to be enjoying the crispy fried vegetables.

I order kamaage udon and kelp rice balls, while Isozaki-sensei orders kamatama udon with walleye pollack roe. It's delicious, but I'm not really in the mood to enjoy eating right now. While getting myself a second cup of water, I bring back warm tea for Isozaki-sensei and Sakurako-san.

“She really did run away from home, after all,” I mutter while handing Isozaki-sensei his tea.

“…It looks like she comes from a strict house, huh.” Isozaki-sensei nods.

It seems like it’s always been that way.

“It seems like mothers doesn’t fully understand how the world works,” Sakurako-san says, while moving half of my remaining kakiage to her plate.

I get a strange feeling. Was Sakurako-san’s mother like that, too? I only saw a picture of her once, but I remember her being a slender, pretty woman. I look at Sakurako-san’s profile while poking my kakiage with my chopsticks. Gran said that Sakurako-san’s face resembles her mother’s. When she’s not saying something rude, Sakurako-san is really beautiful. I wonder if her mother was also ignorant about the ways of the world like she is…

“Kujo-san, do you think that girl really ran away from home?” Isozaki-sensei asks, making me realize I’ve accidentally been staring at Sakurako-san for too long. His voice and expression both seem sorrowful.

Even if we know about her phone, we still have no idea where she could be.

“That’s right… she’s probably not at a friend’s house.”

“She couldn’t be at a karaoke place, or a net café, right? After all, they wouldn’t let her in with a dog,” I ask. The fact that she has her dog, Mimi, makes this even more confusing.

“That’s right. Therefore, it’s hard to imagine that she could be at a normal accommodation facility.”

“Isn’t there a possibility that she left the dog at a pet hotel?” Isozaki-sensei asks, suddenly coming up with the idea.

“If that were the case, why would she take the dog in the first place?”

“She could have been making it seem like she was just going on a walk while she ran away… right?” I say, giving my own reasoning.

“Ah, it certainly could have made it easier for her to leave the house.”

“It’s not impossible, but…”

Isozaki-sensei and I are convinced of that answer, however Sakurako-san tilts her head to the side and puts her index finger to her lips while she thinks.

“Maybe… Is she still outside?” She mumbles after a bit of silence.

There is the possibility that she’s sleeping outside somewhere. Still, if she didn’t have a place to stay, wouldn’t she have left earlier in the day? It would have given her more time to figure things out.

“…Of course, if she left the house without thinking first, she could have depended on a friend. I don’t think that’s the case, but in the event that it is, it isn’t your responsibility,” Sakurako-san says calmly.

“Responsibility… I don’t care about that. No, rather it wouldn’t matter.” Isozaki-sensei raises his voice.

“Anyway, whether she ran away or not, we have to look for her first. I’ll go, too. It’s too late to back out now, anyway. I might even get to see a corpse.”

“Sakurako-san!”

Sakurako-san says exactly what she thinks without any remorse. It's just like finding a dead rabbit in the forest to her. No, both a girl and a rabbit are both the same to her. They're both a "thing" with bones.

"How could you say something so terrible?!"

Isozaki-sensei is at a loss for words. I know that she didn't mean anything bad by it, but I don't have the patience for her.

"What's terrible about that? I'm just mentioning one of the possibilities. Rather, I don't understand why you're intentionally ignoring this possibility. You should think about this case properly."

"You can't just decide on something like this! It's… something that's hard to think about!"

"So you're searching for a missing girl without being prepared to find a corpse? Your student disappeared in the past, but this time is different. Think about it again. Even if you save this girl called Hitoe, the other girl will never come back," Sakurako-san says quietly, in contrast to my anger.

"He knows that!"

"Shoutarou." Isozaki-sensei says my name, then puts his index finger to his lips. "Shoutarou, that's enough."

Everyone in the store is looking at me. I sit down, not realizing that I'd stood up in the first place. I thought the store was empty, but there seems to be several people here. They all give me confused and uncomfortable glares. I feel embarrassed.

"But, Isozaki-sensei…"

Isozaki-sensei just shakes his head. Suddenly, the anger inside me fades, so I sit back down in defeat.

"…Sorry."

"No, it's fine."

Now that I've calmed down, I realize just how rude I had been. He smiles at me, to show he isn't upset.

"…Worst case scenario, the worst has already happened and we aren't in time to stop it," Isozaki-sensei says as he stands up with his tray even though half his udon is still left.

"Let's go. As Kujo-san says, we have to consider the worst. In that case, we have to search for Hitoe."

I check my watch, it's already after 2pm. Even though it's warm today, the days have already become short. It will be dark out in about 2 hours. I stuff my remaining onigiri into my mouth as Sakurako-san gets in the car.

This must be a vivid reminder for Isozaki-sensei of the last disappearance incident. We make quick progress as Isozaki-sensei gets into students from other classes, or who have spoken with Hitoe-san after graduation.

"As I thought, she doesn't seem to be staying with a friend from high school." Isozaki-sensei sighs. "About her job… It seems she was working as a model some time ago, but I don't know about any more recent jobs."

"Model? Like from a fashion magazine?"

Certainly, from the photo I saw of her, Hitoe-san is very pretty. While she might not be quite as stunning as someone like Sakurako-san, she looks like she's easy to get along with,

and most of all, her smile while she was hugging her dog was lovely. However, I still didn't expect this.

"That's… she was a sketching model."

"Sketching… model?"

When I hear the phrase "sketching model" the first thing I imagine is being naked. I shake my head to stop myself from imagining anything else.

"It also seems she found a boyfriend over summer break during university, however… that person used to be Minami's boyfriend."

Sakurako-san snorts as Isozaki-sensei explains. I'm sure she's thinking that it's too silly to concern herself with. She isn't concerned about relationship problems at all.

"So basically… She stole him?"

"Sounds like it. I don't know about their relationship, I only know about the people involved." Isozaki-sensei carefully chooses his words. "She… They started to resent Minami, and started avoiding her several months ago."

"Resent?"

That doesn't sound very good.

"…Of course, I don't know if that has anything to do with our current situation."

"But… Hitoe-san's mom said that she couldn't get in contact with Minami-san, right?"

This story is suddenly going in a disturbing direction. Isozaki-sensei calls another student to make sure we have the right contact information for Minami-san. However, we can't reach her from her cell phone or her house phone.

"…Where does that girl live?"

Isozaki-sensei puts his phone down on his lap with a bitter expression. Sakurako-san tuns is the volume on the music she's listening to, after having it lowered so she doesn't interfere with the call.

"Huh?"

"If we can't get ahold of her by phone, we should just visit her. I've been thinking it's strange for a while now. Why does everyone rely so heavily on those things? It's human beings that are talking to each other, not machines," Sakurako-san, who doesn't have a cell phone, says happily.

It usually causes trouble for me that she doesn't have a cellphone, but I don't mind as much this time.

Part 4

Together with Isozaki-sensei, we visit Minami-san's house. Fortunately, I didn't have any need to worry. The nameplate by the door reads "Tsutsumi." However, after we ring the intercom, there's no answer.

"Looks like they're out."

When will they be back, I wonder? I turn around and look at Sakurako-san, but she shakes her head.

"There's a sign."

I try to look, but Sakurako-san pushes me out of the way and presses the button again. Once, twice, thrice…

"S-Sakurako-san…"

She continues to ring the intercom over and over again. After around the seventh or eighth time, the person inside loses their patience and we hear the rattling sound of someone moving.

"Hey! What the hell! You're so persistent!" An angry woman shouts at us over the intercom.

"Where is your daughter?"

"Huh?"

Sakurako-san shouts back with an equally loud voice. She continues to hit the intercom button again. She doesn't stop until the door opens.

"I get it, already! I'll open the door, so stop!"

It seems she's gone past being angry and is laughing now. The woman inside opens the door with a strained smile. The woman who appears is middle aged, and probably about the same age as my mom. She's a little slimmer than my mom, but she has a hundred times more makeup. Her lips are very red. However, what surprises me most are her shirt and shorts. She's wearing a cardigan on top, but the rest of her outfit are essentially the same as underwear.

"Oh… who are you?" Her hair is light brown, almost golden in colour. She looks at Isozaki-sensei.

"I'm Isozaki, a high school teacher. Is Minami-san home?" Isozaki-sensei bows at the front door.

"Come to think of it, that's right. I haven't seen Mina in about two weeks."

"Two weeks…? Are you not living together?" I accidentally say in surprise.

"We are. Maybe she just hasn't returned home yet? Besides, she isn't a kid anymore. She'll just come back if she needs anything, right?"

I'm taken aback by what this woman, perhaps Minami-san's mother, is saying. Even though her daughter is missing, her tone doesn't have a hint of worry.

"Did she run away from home?"

"Running away from home isn't a big deal! Isn't that girl almost 20 years old? She's too old to need her parents. She seems to have a job, and well… since she's a woman she doesn't need to worry about not having enough money." The mother laughs loudly. "That girl isn't very flashy, and her looks are just so-so, but there's lots of guys who would be happy with the childish type like her."

I'm not really sure how to respond to that… I sigh. I suddenly hear a man yelling angrily from inside the room.

"Who's there?!"

"Mina's teacher from school! They're looking for her!" The mom yells back.

"Mina? I haven't seen her in a while."

A man, who I assume is Minami-san's dad, walks to the entranceway. He's wearing a white tank top and boxers. His clothes seem stretched and faded. Above all else, he reeks of the horrible scent of sweat and cigarettes.

“She’s not here. Too bad.” He says before going back inside. The mom shrugs her shoulders.

However, Sakurako-san tries to shove her way inside the house without permission.

“What are you doing?”

“I want to see your daughter’s room.”

“Excuse me? What did you say?”

“I would like to see your daughter’s room. There are likely clues about her disappearance.”

“Clues?” The mom seems surprised.

“Hitoe-san has also disappeared.” Isozaki-sensei quickly adds.

“Hitoe… Oh, that girl from a nice home!” She doesn’t seem to remember who Hitoe-san is for a moment, and tilts her head to the side until she remembers. “Speaking of her, those girls used to be so close. She looked cute, but she often make fun of adults. Did she get into some kind of trouble?”

“We aren’t sure, but she does seem to be unaccounted for,” Sakurako-san replies.

“…I see. Well, in that case, you can take a quick look around before you go. We don’t have a lot of free time.”

The words ‘unaccounted for’ seem to pull on Minami-san’s mom’s heartstrings. Her child’s former best friend is missing. She pauses for a minute, then lets us inside.

“Please excuse us.” I bow and walk inside.

Inside the room smells like cigarettes, is covered in dust, and the floor somehow feels rough through my socks. The room isn’t necessarily messy, but it does give that impression. In the middle of the living room the dad is lying on a couch, grinning while watching us. I think he’s looking at Sakurako-san’s body.

Since she was on a walk today, Sakurako-san is wearing functional clothing that fits to her body. She’s wearing her usual white shirt, and a pair of cargo pants, but her pants emphasize her waist. I start to feel a little angry, so I step in front of her to protect her from the old man’s gaze.

“What is it?”

“Nothing…”

Sakurako-san looks at me suspiciously, suddenly noticing how close we are. After being verbally guided by her mom saying “that way”, we arrive at Minami-san’s room.

Although it’s in a different place if the house, Minami-san’s room is the same as Hitoe-san’s. There isn’t a whole lot in the room, so it looks clean and tidy. It smells better in here. Isozaki-sensei can’t stand the smell of the living room, so he closes the door even though it’s hard to move.

Minami-san’s room is really simple. At first glance I notice there’s… a lot of books? In Hitoe-san’s room there were a lot of magazines and other things on the bookshelf, but Minami-san’s room has a lot of novels and manga.

“Oh! This stuffed animals looks the same! There was one in Hitoe-san’s room, too.” I suddenly notice the bear stuffed animal on the shelf. Although it’s a bit old, it resembles the one in Hitoe-san’s room.

“Those two… were really close,” Isozaki-sensei mutters, sounding lonely.

“Somehow… their rooms are contrasting.”

“That’s true.”

It still somehow feels like they’re both quite similar. As usual, Sakurako-san starts rudely scouring the room right away.

“Sakurako-san, don’t start going through things on your own…”

She suddenly kneels on the floor and reaches under the bed. I’m distracted by her swaying her hips back and forth until Isozaki-sensei lightly taps my shoulder. I feel guilty, I’m just the same as Minami-san’s dad.

“Look at this.”

It seems like Sakurako-san found something large under the bed. It’s a rectangular object, about 60cm tall and 50cm wide, covered in a plastic bag. Sakurako-san starts tearing the plastic away without a second thought.

“Is this a painting?”

It’s not framed. It’s a western, impressionist style painting with light colours. It has an overall dark tone. It’s a painting of nighttime. There’s a fallen tree by a river bank, illuminated only by the full moon. A woman is sitting on the tree, but it only shows her white back. The woman isn’t wearing any clothes, and she has long, black hair. Her hair looks like it’s wet. On her back are extended, brown wings. The black marks on the wings remind me of something-

“…That butterfly.”

“That’s right, a Diana treebrown.” Sakurako-san nods.

“So this is a picture of… The moon and a butterfly fairy?”

“No… It’s probably just the butterfly itself.”

“Huh?”

“The Diana treebrown’s technical name is Lethe diana. Lethe refers to a river that the dead cross. Diana is the name of the moon goddess.”

“Is that right?” Isozaki-sensei says, turning back to the picture, his face pale.

“Isozaki-sensei?”

“…The model for this picture… Was probably Minami.” He mutters.

“Hitoe also said she modelled for a painting. Modelling for a painting naked like this doesn’t necessarily mean that the model and painter were in a physical relationship. Since Hitoe was also in a painting, something might have happened between the two of them with this painter.”

It seems like Sakurako-san has already lost interest in the painting, since she puts it on top of the bed.

“Do you think there’s a link between both of their disappearances?”

“Perhaps,” She says, shrugging her shoulders.

Isozaki-sensei rushes out of the room to speak with the mom.

“Do you know Minami-san’s contact information?”

“Ah, that girl changed her phone number recently… hold on a minute” She gets her phone out to check. Unlike my mom, who has a Japanese style phone, Minami-san’s mother has a smartphone.

“She didn’t answer when I called, so I think she’s at work right now.”

“Do you know where she works?” Isozaki-sensei asks while adding her phone number to the contact list on his phone.

However, the mother just bluntly says “I don’t know about that stuff”. Perhaps Minami-san never told her, and she really doesn’t know. Sakurako-san leaves the room, while Isozaki-sensei desperately asks the mother what kind of work Minami-san does, but she doesn’t know anything.

“No, it’s fine, Isozaki. I found this.” In Saurako-san’s hand is a brown envelope with a payslip inside.

Part 5

Minami-san works at a major yakiniku chain restaurant on the second floor of a large supermarket in Mizuyama. It’s just after opening time, so there aren’t many customers. It feels a little awkward to call out to the shopkeeper when they’re so busy preparing. Besides this, we have no other leads to follow. The only path we can follow starts from here. Fortunately, the female shopkeeper smiles and greets us when we enter. When we ask if Minami-san came to work today, the shopkeeper told us she has today off.

“Then, in the evening…?”

“Yes, her last shift was yesterday. She worked until closing time.”

Isozaki-sensei lets out a relieved sigh at her words. Is there something going on between those two? Isozaki-sensei must have been worried.

“Is that so…”

The shopkeeper realizes we aren’t ordinary customers. At first she looked suspicious, but after we explain the circumstances, she starts smiling. It seems she knew that Minami-san hadn’t been returning home.

“Umm… But do you happen to know where she is?” She calls out to another female employee.

The woman, named Tsujii-san, is around the same age as Minami-san, and since they started working here around the same time, they’re pretty close. Eventually, a woman with a round face and pretty lips greets us, saying, “I’m Tsujii.”

“I think Tsutsumi-san is at a family restaurant nearby today. I’m pretty sure she’s there to kill time until evening.”

“A family restaurant?”

“Yeah. I think she’s just waiting until she can get the cheap night pack at the Internet café.”

“Does she always do that?”

I thought she would stay at someone else’s house, like Tsujii-san’s place, so her words are a bit worrying.

“Yeah, she doesn’t want to go home. She doesn’t want to be around her mom’s boyfriend… Well, it’s a complicated situation, so I don’t know all the details.”

“Boyfriend…”

I look at Isozaki-sensei. He looks over and nods at me. She must mean the man we thought was her dad. I guess he was just someone her mom is in a relationship with.

“If it’s so hard, why doesn’t she rely on me? I’ve invited her to stay with me… I want her to be happy, but I don’t really get it…” Tsujii-san says, looking down and pouting a bit. “But Tsutsumi-san is smart, she works hard, and she’s a good person. I always make mistakes, but she’s still kind to me.”

In contrast to her mom, this person seems to care about Miami-san. According to Tsujii-san, Minami-san should be at a restaurant about 5 minutes by car from here. They have cheap food, and free drink refills.

“I… thought that man from before was her father.”

“No, her parents got divorced when she was in elementary school.”

“I see…”

Even though their family situations are different, I can understand why Minami-san and Hitoe-san were close friends. They must have both been lonely.

The family restaurant is just on the other side of a bridge. It’s a little early for dinner, but the store is still packed. I don’t know what Minami-san looks like, so I leave it up to Isozaki-sensei to look for her.

“Is she here?”

“Let’s see…”

Eventually, Isozaki-sensei’s eyes stop on a woman sitting in the back corner of the non-smoking section alone at a two person table. Her long hair is definitely the same as in the black butterfly painting. Isozaki-sensei rushes over to the girl he believes is Minami-san.

“Minami…” He says nervously.

The girl seems to be asleep, and doesn’t respond the first time Isozaki-sensei calls her name. He calls her again, and she finally notices and lifts her head.

“Isozaki-sensei…?”

My first impression of her is she looks exhausted. Like her mom said, she isn’t flashy, but she looks nice. However, her face is swollen, and the corners of her mouth are quite low, so she looks older than she is. She stares at Isozaki-sensei, then opens her eyes wide as if she just fully woke up.

“Why? Why are you here?”

“I went to your house, but you haven’t been there. Then we visited your workplace, and they said you might be here.”

“So… It was your phone number, after all. I thought I recognized it.” Minami-san glares at him. “But why did you look for me? You even went so far as to visit the store.”

“I couldn’t contact you, and you haven’t been home in about two weeks… Is it because that person is there?” Isozaki-sensei says. Minami-san nods. “Your mom’s boyfriend?”

“That’s right. How many times will they break up and get back together… it’s stupid. They split up again every time they start fighting. They’ve been doing the same thing over and over again for years.”

“That’s why I’m waiting for that person to disappear,” Minami-san says, then leans on her crossed arms, seemingly tired of speaking.

“But it must be hard for you.”

“But those two always do embarrassing things, even when I’m right there in the living room. Besides… when my mom isn’t around, he tries to touch me, peek at me when I’m changing clothes, steal the clothes I take off… I’m scared, I can’t do anything.” Minami-san closes her eyes, and replies in a voice that sounds like she’s still half asleep.

I don’t think she wants to talk anymore.

“So, that’s why?”

“I’m okay, since I’ve been living like this now. But still, I’ve been saving money little by little, and I plan to start living alone next year.” Minami-san yawns again.

Looking at her, I realize I’ve been blessed to live in the same house as my mother. My mom has a decent income, and as far as I know, she doesn’t have a boyfriend. Besides, even if he isn’t always there, my older brother would make sure I’m not alone. I have no reason to think about running away from home, or rebelling against my mom. There has never been a night where I couldn’t go home. No matter how badly I fight with my mom, I always have a warm meal and a bed when I get home.

“Anyway, I’m fine, don’t worry about me, Isozaki-sensei. Even if you want to show me some half-baked kindness, what comes next? That’s what you have to think about. One person can’t fix all this on his own. The only one who has to worry about me is myself” She finishes talking, pulls her parka onto her knees, curls up, and falls asleep again.

I can’t tell if she’s actually sleeping, or just pretending. Isozaki-sensei stands up, shocked. Seeing his former student living such a rough life probably pierced his heart. He stares at her for a while, then he seems to remember the reason why we’re here.

“…Hitoe… It seems that she ran away from home,” Isozaki-sensei says in a low voice after taking a deep breath.

Minami-san doesn’t respond immediately. Isozaki-sensei lets out a discouraged sigh, but then she responds with an almost robotic answer.

“…I see.”

“Nobody can contact her.”

“That’s a problem, huh?”

Her reply is cold, and she doesn’t sound serious at all. Isozaki-sensei’s face stiffens for a moment.

“Both her mother and I are very worried.”

“Oh well… she’s not a high school student, she can survive without going home.”

“I should know,” she says, her voice trembling with frustration.

“That may be true, but I still thought you might know someth-“

“I don’t know anything!” She suddenly becomes enraged. “I’m sure that she has someone close to her that’ll comfort her! After all, she has so many friends! She’s special, she’s actually cared about!!” Minami-san raises her voice, venting her anger.

Everyone else in the store is staring at her, but she doesn’t care, and continues her shouting. Even Sakurako-san looks surprised by her outburst.

“She did run away with her pet dog. She also brought a particularly heavy extra battery for her phone, and a warm coat. She doesn’t seem to have a change of clothes, though.”

“What are you trying to say?! Well?!”

“I don’t want to lose Hitoe like I lost Futaba!” It seems like her anger was infectious, since Isozaki-sensei is yelling, too. I think this is the first time I’ve seen him this emotional.

“Isozaki, take a seat.” Sakurako-san puts her hand on Isozaki-sensei’s shoulder.

“Umm… You’re bothering the other customers…” There’s a troubled employee holding a menu and a pitcher of water standing behind us.

Isozaki-sensei quickly sits down in the seat opposite to Minami-san. He looks down on her intimidatingly. Sakurako-san encourages me to sit down, then sits next to me. Isozaki-sensei orders a coffee, I get a cup for the drink bar, and Sakurako-san gets a pudding parfait. She’s the only one who could be in a good mood at a time like this. The coffee and drinks are self-serve, so I get the coffee for Isozaki-sensei.

When I get back, he and Minami-san are both sitting in silence. In the midst of the awkward silence, Sakurako-san’s pudding parfait arrives. After the employee leaves, Isozaki-sensei resolves himself, and begins to talk in a strangled voice.

“…Minami, I really need you to tell me if you know anything at all.”

“I don’t.”

“It’s fine if it seems insignificant.”

“I already told you I don’t know anything, didn’t I?” Rather than shouting, she curls up into a ball and hugs herself, like she’s in a shell.

Sakurako-san lifts a spoonful of pudding and fresh cream to her lips. She’s smiling so widely that she almost looks like she’s glowing.

“Where is the artist?” Sakurako-san says, waving her spoon towards Minami-san.

“What do you mean?”

For a moment, Minami-san doesn’t seem to understand what she’s being asked.

“We saw the painting of the Diana treebrown. Wasn’t that girl, Hitoe, a model for a painting?”

“…Who did you hear that from?”

“Where is the painter?”

“I don’t need to answer that.” Minami-san stands up, flustered. Sakurako-san moves over to sit next to Minami-san so she can’t get by.

“Will you answer my question before you leave?”

“No, it has nothing to do with Isozaki-sensei, or any of you.”

“That might be true for me, but this man isn’t unrelated. This man can’t seem to separate himself from the incidents with Futaba or Hitoe… It’s ridiculous.” Sakurako-san lets a laugh slip out.

Isozaki-sensei’s expression stiffens.

“Today, we went to this man’s room. There were a lot of plants there, but none of them had grown very big yet. For example, the Christmas cactus. When it gets old, it turns brown and hard, but the one in his room was still light green. Maybe for the last two or three years, he’s been devoting himself to raising flowers. This man can’t help but raise and collect flowers to try to bury the sense of loss and helplessness from that student that disappeared that he couldn’t save. Isn’t that right, Isozaki?”

Isozaki-sensei doesn’t respond. He just stares at his coffee cup as it gets cold, even though he’s only had one mouthful.

“It’s an addiction. This man needed an innocent life that would respond as he raised it with his own hands, and wouldn’t ever leave him. Perhaps he named each of his plants.” Sakurako-san stifles a laugh in her throat. However, nobody else is laughing. “What a pitiful man. I understand, since my fiancé is similar. This disappearance of his student is the only stain that he can never move past.” Sakurako-san continues, straightening her posture. “That girl named Hitoe is no longer his student. This man isn’t strong enough to consider her disappearance irrelevant.” She sits back in her seat so that Minami-san can get by. “…If you have any compassion, help this foolish man. Even if it’s not for that girl’s sake, but for the sake of your former teacher, will you help us search?”

“…”

The silence flows around us. In the end, Minami-san doesn’t leave.

“…Hanabusa-sensei isn’t there anymore. He only came to Asahikawa during the butterfly season so he could paint them.” She sits back down, takes a deep breath, and starts talking. “I met him when I was at an abandoned house in the middle of the woods that I sometimes stay at. That time, he was just drawing butterflies… The second time I met him he asked me to be a model for a picture.”

At first, she seems hesitant, but as she keeps talking, she becomes more at-ease.

“Of course, I was fully clothed, so I didn’t think Hanabusa-sensei was thinking anything weird. Then he drew those butterfly wings on my back… At the time, I loved him. He was really nice to me, but then Hitoe showed up.”

Her voice becomes hoarse when she says “Hitoe.” I fill her empty cup with melon soda, and she takes a sip.

“…When she saw my picture, she said she wanted one drawn, too. Hanabusa-sensei didn’t refuse. He said I was still important, but with every brush stroke, I could tell his heart was moving towards Hitoe.” Minami-san says calmly, like she’s trying to suppress her emotions.

It’s like she’s telling someone else’s story. If she doesn’t talk about it objectively like that, she might not be able to finish her story. Those of us who are listening also feel her pain.

“I watched… Him draw that picture of Hitoe. By the time it was finished, the looks those two shared was completely different. Even if I hated it, I knew that there was no way I could stay with either of them.” Minami-san takes another sip of her melon soda and sighs. Her expression looks like she’s given up. “But, Hanabusa-sensei only comes to Asahikawa when it’s warm. He left Asahikawa when the season turned to fall… in the end, he wasn’t serious about me or Hitoe.” Minami-san lets out a self-deprecating laugh. Even though she laughed, it was cold. She crosses her arms. “I hear that Hitoe was depressed about it, but I pretended I didn’t know because I knew I wasn’t relevant anymore. Besides… given the situation, I knew it was going to happen. He was a person who only showed up in the summer.”

“But… we heard that you still resent Hitoe.”

“Me? No way! Not at this point.” Minami-san just laughs at me. “Back then, Hitoe would always want what I had. When my grandma would buy me a teddy bear, Hitoe immediately bought the same one. If I said I wanted something, she would buy it first and show it off. It was always like that!”

Is that why they both had the same teddy bear in their rooms? Even though their relationship sounds like it was good… a slight bitter feeling spreads through my chest.

“But really… that was a long time ago. That place is like the embodiment of that point in time, and also the end of that love. Hitoe definitely only wanted him because I like him. She was always so childish like that. Well… Since it was a long time ago, I don’t hate her for it anymore.”

So, in other words, she doesn’t hate Hitoe-san anymore. Her voice sounds so tender, but somehow I feel like it’s not genuine.

“Well, tell me where that abandoned house is. She could be there,” Sakurako-san says.

“I can’t.” Minami-san clearly refuses. “My parents are the worst, and Hitoe always knew that. When they did mean things to me, she would listen to me talk about it. I don’t hate Hitoe, but that girl is not my friend anymore. So, that’s why… don’t even think about making me connect with that girl again!” Minami-san is finished talking, so she grabs her bag and parka then runs out of the store.

Isozaki-sensei and Sakurako-san chase after her while I hurriedly pay for our drinks before leaving the store. If it had cost another 200 yen, I wouldn’t have been able to afford it. Isozaki-sensei chases after Minami-san on foot while Sakurako-san gets in her car. For a moment, I worry about which way I should go. Before I can decide, Sakurako-san’s car pulls in front of Minami-san to block her path.

“I’m done talking to you!” Minami-san shouts while Sakurako-san rolls down her window.

“No, you’re not. You’re getting too emotional. Your mind and body are both fatigued. Your poor posture during our conversation is a sign your serotonin secretions are inhibited by your fatigue. Serotonin secretions affect your trapezius muscles and your antigravity muscles, in other words, your neck, shoulders, back, and lower legs. It’s the same with your facial muscles. If you’re tired, your posture and the appearance of your face will worsen. That’s how you are right now. You’re probably more exhausted than you think.”

“…What are you trying to say?”

Sakurako-san shows Minami-san her true colours. Minami-san looks at her, confused. She always does things the hard way.

“I’ll say it one more time, you’re exhausted.”

“Do… Do you think I don’t already know that?! Would it be better if I went home and my mom’s boyfriend assaulted me?!”

“I didn’t say that.” Sakurako-san takes a deep breath. “…You should know that my mother wasn’t a saint, either. Ever since I was born, she’s been a nightmare and a symbol of hatred in my life. My mother hated me until her last breath.”

“…Why?”

“Let’s see… The root cause was probably the fact that I’m a ’woman’.” Sakurako-san says, getting out of her car. “My grandfather wanted my mother to have a son, so he could take over the family. Since my grandmother failed to give birth to a man, my mother was raised since she was young that she should have a son. When my twin brother died, and only I was left, my mother was angry.”

“But that… That isn’t your fault.”

“But my mother didn’t think so.”

Minami-san seems to be moved by Sakurako-san’s story. I feel the same way. It’s my first time hearing all this about her mother. I knew that she didn’t have a very good relationship

with her mother, but I think this is the first time I've seen her open up about it like this. That's probably why she speaks more like a man, and wears men's shirts…

"You should rest at my house for a night. If it's just one night, it'll be fine, right? Don't hesitate. Other than me, there's only my dog and gran. If you say you absolutely don't want to, I won't force you. However, you just need to eat and sleep. A quiet meal is important. Anyway, 8% of your serotonin is in your platelets, only 2% is produced in the central nervous system and brain, and the remaining 90% comes from your intestines." Sakurako-san is talking too fast for me to say anything, so I just take off my jacket and put it around Minami-san's shoulders.

"Although you may not think much about your posture, it can put pressure on you internal organs and intervertebral disks, which can cause lower back pain or a lumbar disk hernia. Even if you're still young, your back muscles will start to weaken, and you'll end up tormented by back pain. As humans began to walk on two legs, their centre of gravity moved to their hips. If you want to be able to walk the way you can now when you get old, you should listen to my advice."

"Are… you a doctor?"

"No, but my uncle was a doctor in forensic pathology, so his specialty was corpses."

Upon hearing about corpses, Minami-san's forehead wrinkles.

"Get in the car. The sun is going down and the wind is getting cold. You're already exhausted and it'll only lower your immune strength. You could catch a cold."

Minami-san does not run away. She climbs into the car like Sakurako-san asked her to.

"Sakurako-san… Umm…" I call out to Sakurako-san as she closes the car door, even though I don't exactly know how to phrase what I want to say. "This is my first time hearing about… your twin brother."

"Of course it is. I don't have a twin brother."

"What?!"

Sakurako-san moves in close to me. She grabs the back of my neck and pulls my head down towards her. My heart rate shoots up.

"…I won't take my eyes off that girl. She knows something else."

"Huh?"

"She keeps trying to hide herself, it's a sign of anxiety, that she's hiding something. It's things like when she hugs her arms around her body. Those kinds of self-intimate behaviours have a tendency to be done involuntarily to relieve tension and anxiety." Sakurako-san calmly whispers to me. "Basically, she knows where that girl disappeared to, but she just doesn't want to tell us." She says, then steps away from me. "For now, let's leave it alone. If we bring it up now, it'll only cause her to panic." She says, then heads for the driver's seat of her car.

Sakurako-san seemed to be truly worried about Minami-san. Was all of that just a lie?!

"Isozaki."

Still dumbfounded, I climb into the car. Sakurako-san calls out to Isozaki-sensei, who has his hand on the door. He has been quiet for a long time, so I think he's upset. Sakurako-san probably hit the nail on the head with her analysis before. He can't be happy with his secret being exposed in front of his student like that. Actually, he might even be angry. As proof, he doesn't reply even when Sakurako-san calls him by his name.

"That was rude of me."

Even though her apology is so short, Isozaki-sensei blinks in surprise for a moment. He makes a bitter smile and says, “I have a first name, you know.”

Part 6

Gran is delighted, rather than surprised by the sudden visitors. She usually only cooks meals for Sakurako-san, so she’s happy she gets to use her skills for someone else. She heads towards the kitchen. Still, she doesn’t have enough ingredients for such sudden visitors. Gran says that she wants to go shopping, but Sakurako-san replies with, “just make whatever you can with what we have. Something quick and easy will be fine.” Gran looks a bit less happy now. Gran is always a great cook.

In about an hour, the dining table has pork fried with ginger, carrot kinpara, roasted sweet potatoes, and soup that has potatoes and pumpkin in it. There’s also salmon roe with soy sauce. It certainly is a quick meal to make.

For Minami-san, who ran away from her family, this is a feast. Her and Isozaki-sensei keep commenting on how delicious it is. We’re also having rice cooked in an earthenware pot. I stuff my mouth full of rice and salmon roe. It’s salmon season, so when I go home, my mom will probably have roasted salmon and pickled roe. Still, gran’s pickled roe is a bit sweeter than my mom’s, so I prefer it. The flavour of the roe and fresh rice burst in my mouth. This is the best part of autumn. The dinner seemed like too much food at first, but we easily eat everything in no time.

“That was delicious, I’m completely full. The was pork especially delicious.”

“Yeah, I love it when gran makes pork fried with ginger.”

“I’m glad you enjoyed it,” gran says as she starts cleaning up the dishes. Minami-san offers to help, but gran politely declines. She doesn’t want guests to feel like they need to help. At this house, I’m more like a half guest. With gran’s instructions, I help bring post-meal tea to everyone.

“I don’t usually like ginger, but this was good.” Minami-san laughs while she sips her warm tea.

Does delicious rice have the power to melt the ice around a person’s heart? She seems so calm that she’s like a different person.

“Oh, speaking of ginger, gran’s pork fried with ginger isn’t too spicy, is it?”

I nod. It’s absolutely as Minami-san says, gran’s pork fried with ginger isn’t too harsh. It’s rather sweet, the meat is thin, it’s soft, and easy to eat.

“That’s because the young lady hates the spiciness of ginger.” Gran laughs as she listens to our conversation.

“This ginger isn’t grated, it’s from a store bought tube. It softens the scent and spiciness.”

“It’s not very popular with adults,” gran adds. She tops up Sakurako-san’s tea.

“To be honest, I prefer ginger a little more the usual way.” Isozaki-sensei finds the ginger too sweet.

“Naoe-sama says that, too. However, since the young lady isn’t a fan of meat, it gives me a lot of trouble,” gran says, laughing. It seems I still have a child’s taste in food.

“It’s a shame I couldn’t prepare something more elaborate for everyone.”

“Don’t worry, everyone is happy with this,” Sakurako-san says.

“The carrot kinpira was delicious, too.”

“The young lady doesn’t like the earthy scent of burdock. She doesn’t like chilli peppers, either.”

“Gran… could you stop talking already?”

“Hohohoho…”

Sakurako-san has a frustrated expression, and puts her hand on her forehead.

“If I asked the young lady, I wonder what kind of meal she would think of for me to make.”

Minami-san accidentally laughs.

“Cooking is good for saving money. Fortunately, gran and I can live without inconvenience, and as long as we don’t spend unnecessarily, we can stay in this house– honestly, that skill is very helpful.”

“You don’t make those specimens for money?”

“I don’t. I can’t sell those.”

Of course that’s it. Now that I think about it, the number of bones in the living room seems to have increased.

“It’s meal time, so bone talk is prohibited. Especially since the young lady won’t be able to stop.”

Gran comes back holding a tray. Minami-san wanders through the living room in amazement. Fortunately, she doesn’t seem disgusted. Still, I would prefer not to talk about bones right after a meal.

“Even though you’re full, would you still like dessert?”

We can’t help but stop our conversation with gran placing steaming apple pie in front of us.

“It smells like cinnamon,” Minami-san says happily.

“Even though it doesn’t cost much, as long as it’s made with love, it’ll be delicious.”

She gives us fresh cream and ice cream, as well. It looks even more delicious on the pie.

“Give me the big piece next to that one.” Sakurako-san complains about being given a small piece.

“This one is for the young master.”

“Why?!”

“You didn’t eat your meat today.” Gran turns away and puts the bigger piece in front of me.

“I might not even need a second piece.”

Gran has only one rule – to eat lots of food. I stick out my chest with pride.

“This warm apple pie is really delicious… Somehow it’s cozy. It feels like we’re a happy family.” Minami-san sounds like the happiest person alive as she takes a bite of pie with the cold ice cream.

I wonder if all girls are weak to sweet things. Actually, is it even limited to just women? Isozaki-sensei is also eating with a delighted expression. The crust on the pie is firm, and the

pieces of apple are big. The sweet and sour apples, seasoned with cinnamon, fills your mouth with flavour. The apples are still a bit crunchy, so they feel nice to chew.

"I baked it at around noon, then reheated it in the oven just now. If you enjoy it, I'm happy."

"I love apple pie," Minami-san says, sounding truly delighted. Gran also seems to be in a good mood as she hums while heading into the kitchen to prepare tea.

We enjoy the apple pie as the post-meal fatigue sets in. Minami-san really loves the apple pie. However, the delightful expression she started with begins to cloud, little by little.

"Is something wrong?" I ask Minami-san, who stops moving her fork.

Minami-san shakes her head "no". However, she doesn't move her fork again.

"…Hitoe wasn't very good at cooking, but she loved to bake sweets. She often made apple pie for me back then," Minami-san mutters in response. "It was because I love sweets. She practiced a lot for me, and always, without exception, made me some on my birthday, or for special occasions… but they were never delicious like this." Minami-san laughs. However, her eyes are turning red. "She messed up a lot, and often burned them… but Hitoe's apple pies are still my favourite," she says, starting to open up. A large tear drips down her cheek and onto the plate in front of her.

"…You can take the rest to your room. Don't push yourself, you should get some rest."

Now we won't have the chance to hear about where Hitoe-san is. However, Sakurako-san still urges Minami-san to go. Minami-san must be exhausted. Sakurako-san probably thought it would be a problem if we tried to get information from her but she got emotional again. Eventually, gran takes Minami-san upstairs to her room. Once she's out of sight, Isozaki-sensei sighs. He must really just want to find Hitoe-san as soon as possible. He says that he'll try calling around a bit more, and heads home.

Now that I take a look at the clock, it's almost 8pm. Since it's getting a bit late to walk home, I call my mom. I throw a ball for Hector while I wait for her to drive here and pick me up.

Before I even notice she's gone, Sakurako-san comes back in different clothes. She's wearing a white dress with a woven cardigan. The soft fabric clearly shows her curves, so I don't know where to look.

"Boy, do you have any plans tomorrow?" Sakurako-san asks me, petting Hector's head.

"I did, but this is my top priority."

Of course it is. I can't just pretend like I don't know what happened.

"Then come here in the morning. We can have breakfast together."

"…Alright."

"What is it?"

"No, it's nothing. I was just wondering why."

Sakurako-san raises one eyebrow. Apparently she doesn't seem aware. It's been a long time since she last invited me to her house willingly.

Part 7

First thing in the morning, I have a shower and head to Sakurako-san's house. The weather forecast said it should be warm today. Tomorrow morning, the usual cold is supposed to return. This may be the last time this year that I can go to her house by bike. Thinking about that, I park my bike in the garden. Hector and Isozaki-sensei come running over to me, both of them panting heavily.

"Huh? Why are you here, Isozaki-sensei?"

"Why are you complaining?" He says, sulking. It seems he took Hector on his morning walk.

"Did anything happen after you left? Did Hitoe-san's parents contact you?"

Unfortunately, Isozaki-sensei shakes his head.

"It's been really cold since midnight last night… I hope she comes home today."

"Ah… I see."

Isozaki-sensei looks up at the sky while he speaks. The sky is blue today.

"The rice is ready." Gran happily greets us from inside the house while holding a clay pot.

This morning's breakfast are saury boiled in soy sauce that's soft to the bone, grilled salmon, and konjac with cod roe. They're all side dishes that taste delicious with rice. Sakurako-san sits on her chair in the living room, and calmly pets Hector. Minami-san, who has just finished changing clothes, comes down from the second floor. She's wearing a thin jersey shirt and rough jeans, with her long hair is tied up in a bun. Because of that, she doesn't have the same raggedy atmosphere as yesterday.

"Ah… Good morning."

"I was just about to go call you. Now, let's eat before the food gets cold," Gran says happily, despite Minami-san's greeting being slightly awkward.

We all gather at the table. I love miso soup, especially funori miso soup. I'm eating a particularly chewy piece of funori when Minami-san suddenly calls out to Isozaki-sensei.

"Yes?" Isozaki-sensei stops picking at his fish for a moment and immediately respond in a gentle voice.

"You see… I'm going to look for Hitoe, too," Minami-san timidly begins to speak. "I was thinking about it all night… about how Hitoe doesn't have a warm breakfast like this right now. I'm sure her mom is worried about her." Minami-san has a lonely smile on her face as she looks down at her warm breakfast. "I tried calling her, but it didn't go through. Maybe… She's not in range." She says, putting her phone on the table. She puts her hand over it. "I think… She's probably at that house where Hanabusa-sensei was. The cell service there is unstable."

"Minami…" Isozaki-sensei sighs with relief.

"But I want to go there alone. Hitoe, Futaba, and I… That was a secret place where we'd always hang out. That's why I don't want other people to know about it… Even you, Isozaki-sensei." Minami-san says clearly.

"But what if we-"

"Then I won't go." Minami-san shoots down Isozaki-sensei's suggestion of accompanying her. "If I'm not alone, I won't help Hitoe." Minami-san glares at us, showing her strong will.

“What’s with the distance between you and the girl who disappeared?” Sakurako-san suddenly asks Minami-san.

“…Huh?”

“Why did you cut off your relationship with that girl named Hitoe?” Sakurako-san pours apple jam onto her yogurt while she stares at Minami-san.

“No reason in particular… It’s just that without Futaba, it was hard for us to hang out on our own.”

“You say that now, but she once stole the man you liked. Weren’t you friends since you were children? When you lose a friend you had in common, it’s not unusual for you to drift apart, but you two were childhood friends. Does losing a mutual friend mean you have to sever that friendship?”

“Well… That’s just what ended up happening.”

“Really? I don’t think so. Either one or both of you are the real cause for why that girl named Futaba disappeared.”

“Wh…” Isozaki-sensei gasps.

“…Why do you think that?” Minami-san doesn’t deny it, instead, she asks a question.

“If that’s your answer, I’ll explain. Something created a rift in your relationship, so you couldn’t trust each other and didn’t want to be around each other anymore. Something caused that to happen. Since that girl named Futaba disappeared, it’s natural to think you two were involved.”

“…”

Minami-san loses her grip on her chopsticks. Her face turns pale.

“Minami… Do you really know where Futaba is?” Isozaki-sensei asks in surprise.

She lowers her head in response.

“You told us that you didn’t know anything about either of them!” Isozaki-sensei’s voice turns rough.

Minami-san wraps her arms around herself, as if she’s shielding herself from his words.

“…I didn’t say that.”

“Well, let’s move on from this. Talking about a corpse won’t make the bones start moving.” Sakurako-san says after the explosive situation from a moment ago.

“Talking about a corpse…”

Isozaki-sensei’s face turns pale. Sakurako-san turns to face Minami-san.

“Instead of guiding us to your secret place, think of it as guiding us to where your friend is.” Sakurako-san gets up from her chair, but Minami-san stays silent again.

After a moment, she sighs and says, “…fine,” in a frail voice.

We finish our breakfast and get into Sakurako-san’s car. Hector follows us, wagging his tail. Minami-san and Isozaki-sensei get into the back seat. Hector smiles and climbs in by their feet.

“Hey, Hector! We’re not going on a walk today.” I quickly try to scold him.

Still, he stays in his spot and sticks his nose between the driver’s seat and passenger’s seat.

“Sorry, recently he’s been thinking that we’re always going somewhere to play…”

“It’s not a problem,” Sakurako-san says quickly before starting the car, despite Isozaki-sensei and Minami-san’s troubled expressions.

“S…Sorry.” I apologize to Minami-san about how she’s going to get fur on her clothes.

Even though he’s brushed thoroughly every day, he still loses an impressive amount of hair while his winter coat grows in. I wonder if you could knit a sweater with all of it? I reluctantly put Hector on his leash and climb in the car, as well.

While Diavel’s voice resounds through the car, Minami-san points us toward Asahigaoka. The area has many workshops for artists. The car soon enters a forest. Half way through, there’s an area that seems to be private property, and there’s wire mesh to stop people from entering.

“It’s in here,” Minami-san hesitantly says.

The wire mesh has a paddock. From here, we’ll have to get out of the car and walk. Sakurako-san pulls Minami-san’s hairpin off her head and opens the lock in an instant.

“Boy, Isozaki, go back to the car,” Sakurako-san says without changing her expression.

“This is a crime, isn’t it…?”

“Well… it’s only trespassing once you go inside.”

She opens the lock with a complete lack of restraint. Isozaki-sensei and I give a strained smile. It’ll definitely be illegal once we go in. I know it isn’t much of an excuse, but I tell myself that finding Hitoe-san is most important. The car travels along the gravel road for a while until we stop at an open area that appears to be a parking lot.

“…This is it.”

Behind the tall trees, I can see a large, two story house. It’s a quiet place, with only the rustling of trees. Minami-san tells us that there’s a kiln behind the house, since potters used to stay here.

“Hey, Hector!”

Hector leaps out of the car as soon as Isozaki-sensei opens the door.

“Hector, stay,” Sakurako-san says to Hector, who is delightedly jumping around.

Since Hector is so well behaved, he immediately stops and sits down, then waits for further instructions from his owner. I quickly attach the leash to his neck. Sakurako-san also gets out of the car, and gently pets Hector. Hector smiles happily. When Minami-san sees his bright expression, she starts to smile a bit.

“Alright, I know something you like is buried here. Go find it for us,” Sakurako-san says, removing the leash from his neck.

I understand what she means instantly.

“S-Sakurako-san!”

“What is it?”

“Well…” I try to scold her, but I can’t get my words out with Isozaki-sensei and Minami-san’s unaware gazes on me. “Well, Hector is…”

It’s hard to say anything further in front of Minami-san. Sakurako-san notices and gives me an evil smirk.

“That dog has slightly peculiar tastes,” Sakurako-san says, smiling at Minami-san. It’s a pretty, but malicious, smile.

“Peculiar tastes?”

“He has lost many of his previous owners, whose bodies weren’t discovered for several days. Hector always stayed by his master’s side… So he has come to like the scent of corpses. He’s obsessed with chasing the scent of death, as if he’s searching for his late owners.”

“Huh…?” The blood drains from Minami-san’s face.

“Dogs have a sharp sense of smell. Of course, he’s no exception. Hector’s special skill is finding death bodies, even if they’ve been buried in the ground – perhaps even for several years.”

“What?! That’s horrible! We’re looking for Hitoe, aren’t we?! Futaba is completely unrelated!” Minami-san explodes with rage at Sakurako-san.

“I just stated the facts. Hector is doing the searching, not me.” Sakurako-san gives a short reply.

Hector is already out of sight. He seemed like he picked up on a scent, and ran in the direction of the house.

“What did you say…?” Isozaki-sensei asks Minami-san in a serious tone.

“…Nothing, I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Could it be that Futaba… Futaba is here as well?” Isozaki-sensei asks at the mention of Futaba-san’s body.

“I wasn’t involved.” Minami-san’s face turns red as she starts to tremble.

Even though her words sound aggressive, her voice sound tearful. Moments later, we hear Hector’s barks echoing.

“Sakurako-san, it’s Hector.”

Sakurako-san smiles, and takes her portable, folding shovel out of the car. Relying on Hector’s voice for directions, we begin to be able to see the shape of a Samoyed barking under a large elm tree in front of the house.

“…Futaba is here?”

As we approach, Hector happily barks while frantically digging at the roots of the tree. It seems like somewhere you’d meet the love of your life rather than somewhere to dig up a corpse. He looks really happy, and the sound is still echoing.

“The body of your classmate is buried here. Did you kill her?” Sakurako-san asks Minami-san while she assembles her shovel.

“It really wasn’t me… but I did help bury her.” Minami-san puts her fist in front of her mouth and trembles while she answers.

“Then who killed her?”

“It wasn’t Hitoe!” Minami-san says reflexively. Nobody even mentioned Hitoe-san.

“I see, so Hitoe was the murderer, then.”

“You’re wrong! It really wasn’t Hitoe! Futaba committed suicide! She hanged herself!”

“Then why did you bury her?”

Minami-san gulps at Sakurako-san’s objection, knowing she’s in trouble. That’s right. If it was suicide, there would be no reason to bury the body here specifically. Sakurako-san starts digging with her shovel, so I start helping right away. Isozaki-sensei also finds a snow shovel in front of the house’s storage room. He also starts digging silently. Minami-san crouches down and begins to cry.

For a while, only the sounds of our digging and Minami-san's crying fills the air. Before long, I feel my shovel hit something in the ground. Sakurako-san pushes me away and gently digs with her hands. Soon, something that is undeniably a bone emerges. It's a long, straight bone.

"This must be the radius," Sakurako-san says, wiping away the dirt with a towel she took from the car.

Isozaki-sensei throws his shovel away, and clings to tree a short ways away from us. It looks like he's trying to stop himself from crying.

"…Why did you bury her?" Sakurako-san asks.

Minami-san buries her face in her knees, refusing to answer. Sakurako-san brings the bone closer to her face.

"Eek!" Minami-san leans away.

I don't think she has the energy to stand up.

"Will you start talking to me yet? I'm short-tempered," Sakurako-san says in a low voice. She pulls on Minami-san's chin with the bone.

She pulls herself away and screams, "I get it already, stop it!"

"Why did you bury her?" Sakurako-san asks again.

"I… I hid the corpse because Hitoe was the reason Futaba committed suicide. It was Hitoe's fault that she died… But I wouldn't be able to live with myself if she was blamed so I did what she said… I buried the body here." Minami-san rushes through her explanation. "This is a place that was special to us, practically nobody comes here, and there won't be anyone coming to buy this property anytime soon, so it seemed like the perfect place… Futaba really loved Hitoe. I knew that she really thought that she was really a hinderance. Hitoe always wanted to be special."

"And that's the reason for her suicide?"

"…Futaba started to become kind of frightening. She always had a calm, quiet atmosphere about her. She was a happy girl. Then she saw pictures of dead people online, and she started to lose her temper."

Sakurako-san just wants a definite answer from her. Minami-san either doesn't notice, or she doesn't want to answer the questions properly.

"Hitoe would often cut her wrists, and say that she wanted to die. That day, she got into a big fight with her mom, and said that she definitely wanted to die. But the same as usual, I didn't think she would really go through with it." Minami-san sighs. "But… That day, Futaba suddenly said, 'then I'll die with you.' I couldn't tell you if Hitoe was really serious or not, or if she even knew herself. The atmosphere started to feel off."

She calmed down while she was talking, so she stands up and brushes the dirt off herself. "I tried to tell them to knock it off, that it wasn't funny, but they started looking for tools to kill themselves with in the house. I was scared. Futaba said, 'if you're going to get in the way, why don't you just go home?' I really did leave after that."

She turns to look at the house. The half-broken door to the storage shed catches my eye.

“I thought that if I stayed there, I’d die, too… I was really scared… But while I was walking home, I started to worry, so I went back… On the way back, I saw Hitoe crying on the path. Futaba had really hanged herself…”

Isozaki-sensei crouches by the roots of the tree while he listens to Minami-san’s story. Each word must be painful for him to hear, coming from his former student.

“She couldn’t find a long rope, so she had to use a short one. She said that she looked it up online beforehand. Hitoe said Futaba could go first, but then she really died.” After that, Minami-san loses her composure again. She lets out a sigh that shakes the air around us.

“When I went to take a look, Futaba was really dead. I didn’t even have to look closely, her face seemed off. Hitoe was crying the whole time, and panicking about what to do…”

I’m sure she’s remembering the sight of Futaba-san’s corpse right now. Her breathing gradually gets rougher. Beads of sweat form on her forehead.

“There wasn’t anything we could do other than take the shovel from the house and bury her. I knew I had to bury her really deep, so I kept digging until my hands started to bleed. I kept digging…” Minami-san has to put in a lot of effort to get her words out.

I look down at my feet. The same shovel is lying there. The same one she used to bury her friend’s corpse.

“Why didn’t you say that before?!”

“I wanted to be honest, I really did! It was hard to lie to you all like that! I didn’t want anyone to blame Hitoe!” Isozaki-sensei shouts, unable to bear listening to any more. Despite his loud voice, Minami-san shouts back.

“I’m not saying that Hitoe absolutely wasn’t part of the reason, but the fact that Futaba died is only the fault of Futaba herself. So… I wanted to protect Hitoe. I thought I was the only one who could protect her…”

“In that case, why did you abandon that girl?”Sakurako-san quietly asks, pressing the radius against her face. Tears quietly start to fall from Minami-san’s eyes.

“… Hitoe… she seemed really depressed for a while after Futaba’s death, but after a while she started hanging out with other girls, like she had forgotten about Futaba. She was so strangely cheerful that I couldn’t keep up.” She sighs deeply. “I couldn’t believe Hitoe, so I got angry. I wanted to tell someone about Futaba, but I was the one that buried her. If it was investigated, I would be arrested for burying her… so I decided to forget about Futaba. And forget about Hitoe, as well.” Minami-san stares at the run down house again while sniffling. “… But I couldn’t forget, so I’d come here sometimes. Then, I met Hanabusa-sensei.”

“That artist?”

“That’s right… After Futaba died, I started to think of Hitoe as a cruel, dishonest girl. So even after reuniting here, we didn’t mention Hitoe much… but maybe I was just worried because I couldn’t really forget about her and Futaba. I think that’s why that girl also came here.”

“Even now?”

Minami-san nods at Sakurako-san’s question.

“Isozaki-sensei. That why… Hitoe is most likely in this house.”

Since Isozaki-sensei isn’t helping us dig up Futaba-san, he goes to search for Hitoe. He quickly stands up, and heads inside.

“Hector, search the house. Come here,” Sakurako-san instructs her dog.

“But I don’t think Hitoe is dead… so your dog doesn’t need to search for her,” Minami-san says. However, her voice sounds uneasy.

“…But there seems to be a corpse.”

Hector seems to have found another “thing he likes”, so he runs past us and quickly disappears into the house.

“No way…” The blood drains from Minami-san’s face as she chases after him.

The house seems like it’s still structurally sound and quite clean, despite nobody living there. The remaining pieces of furniture are covered in dust, but the overall condition isn’t too bad. The electricity, gas, and water are shut off, of course. During the summer, when you don’t need the heat on, it doesn’t seem like it would be too uncomfortable to live here. Still, an abandoned house is still just that. The air is cold and still, there’s signs of animals living here, and it’s eerie. Still, with the encouragement of the sun’s light shining in, I step into the house.

“Upstairs,” Sakurako-san says quickly, after seeing Hector’s paw prints.

We follow them up the stairs. Hector is happily barking at a closed door. He’s probably trying to ask us to open it for him. Hector can normally open some doors, but he isn’t good with regular door knobs. Sakurako-san puts the leash around his neck before opening the door.

It’s a bedroom. The bed seems to have been left intact. There’s a shadow of someone in here.

“Ah…”

When we step inside, the shadow moves. It suddenly jolts in surprise, and scatters into the air.

“Diana treebrowns…”

On the bed, where the sunlight is shining, there’s a large group of butterflies. Butterflies that gather around corpses. They flutter out the open window, and disappear into the sky.

“Hitoe!” Isozaki-sensei rushes to the bed.

On the bed is a girl with her eyes closed, and a brown dog. They look familiar. They’re from that photograph. Hitoe-san and Mimi. Isozaki-sensei and Minami-san stand beside the bed. Sakurako-san pushes them aside so she can take Hitoe-san’s pulse.

“…The dog is dead. The girl is still breathing.”

Relieved, Minami-san puts her hand on Hitoe-san’s chest. She’s probably trying to feel her heartbeat.

“A drug induced sleep… Don’t worry, at this dose, it won’t be fatal.”

There’s a medicine sheet with several pills missing. Sakurako-san makes sure there aren’t any other sheets before telling us.

“So she’s just sleeping! This isn’t enough to kill her! Hitoe doesn’t like taking medicine. Maybe after seeing her dog die, she was so scared she couldn’t bring herself to take enough!” Minami-san says ridiculous things in a gentle voice while tears well up in her eyes. “Even though she cut her wrists, it’s so shallow that there’s only a bit of blood. She doesn’t have the courage to die!!” She mutters, “I’m glad, though…”

“…Hitoe wanted to die for a long time, she’s had it so hard, she was trying to ask for help. She’s strong, so she couldn’t say it outright. I didn’t take her seriously… I was really stupid.”

“…Stupid...” I suddenly hear a weak voice.

“Hitoe…” Minami-san’s voice is full of joy. Hitoe opens her eyes slightly.

“That’s right! Involving others like that… You’re really stupid, Hitoe!”

“…Yeah,” Hitoe-san says in a weak, tired voice, then nods.

“If you got hurt… there wouldn’t be any point in it.”

Her pale hand reaches out and wipes the tears on Minami-san’s face. Minami grabs Hitoe’s hand tightly. The two hug each other and start crying loudly. Sakurako-san loses interest, and pretends not to see them while she leaves the room. I run after her. She’s going toward the elm tree.

“Sakurako-san, I’ll do it instead.”

I don’t want to use the same shovel that was used to bury the body, so I resume digging with the folding shovel.

“Don’t worry, everything should already be turned to beautiful bones.”

I’m digging carefully because I know I’m already near the bones, but Sakurako-san seems to think it’s because I’m scared. I force a smile. Still, I continue digging. Somehow, I forget I’m scared. Does this mean I’m “getting used to corpses”? Maybe Sawa-san was right when he said I’m the kind of person who can stay calm around corpses…

“Still… This is pretty terrible,” I say to Sakurako-san while digging slowly and carefully.

Sakurako-san shoots back, “really? Isn’t pushing past the police and figuring out justice what those ‘great detectives’ you like so much do?”

“You’re not a detective… Just a lady with a bad personality.”

“That’s true, but there’s a reason the truth is hidden, like flesh around bones. If it’s in bad taste, or grotesque, to collect bones, then detectives are just the same. They’re just revealing someone’s hidden secrets for their own self satisfaction. They’re essentially the same. It’s the difference between damaging a corpse and damaging a living human.”

I frown.

“But wouldn’t the bereaved family be happy if the criminal was caught?”

“…That’s just one goal.”

“Goal?”

“Exactly. They’ll harbour resentment if the criminal isn’t punished. But if they were caught and sentenced to death, that wouldn’t be their real goal. The true resolution to the case for the family would be to have the dead be revived again, to have their lives left unchanged, isn’t it? There’s no way for the bereaved family to reach a solution. They’ll be the same for the rest of their lives.”

“The rest… of their lives.”

I hear a sound from around my feet.

“Sakurako-san…”

It’s a round, white lid. I already know what it is.

“I’ll take over.”

She takes the shovel from me. As I thought, I’m just not good with dead things. I also don’t like bones. Watching the huge earthworms falling off the skull fills me with so much disgust and fear that I just want to run away.

Part 8

I leave Sakurako-san to dig up the bones and head to where Isozaki-sensei is. I need to talk about the corpse. Fortunately, he's just leaving the house now.

"Isozaki-sensei… Um, Sakurako-san…"

"…Ah, I get it."

He can understand from just my expression. We both hurry back to the tree. Sakurako-san has already dug up most of the body. She's wearing the same gloves as always, and holding the skull and another small bone in her hand. She looks serious.

"…This isn't right," Sakurako mutters quietly.

"What's wrong?"

"…This person wasn't hanged."

"Huh?"

"This corpse wasn't killed by hanging. It was strangulation. It wasn't suicide."

"Strangled… you mean someone… someone killed her?" For a moment, I can feel the blood drain from my face.

"That's right. The thyroid cartilage and hyoid bone are broken. This bone is located between your lower jaw and pharynx. If you hang yourself, you can't break it unless you're very heavy, or fall a long way. By looking at the remains of her clothes, I don't think she would have been heavy enough. Therefore, if her thyroid cartilage and hyoid bone were broken by hanging, someone would have had to pull down on her legs or something… either way, a third party is involved."

"That can't be…"

Sakurako-san touches her own throat while she explains. Just then, Minami-san and Hitoe-san walk out together, side by side.

"Hitoe…" Even after Isozaki-sensei calls out to her, she still doesn't seem to understand what's happening. However, as soon as she sees the dug up soil, she quickly understands.

"Wha… why?! Why are you even digging there?!"

"I've had enough, already… I can't leave Futaba like this anymore." Minami-san clings to Hitoe-san while she shouts. She seems to have already decided. However, Hitoe-san tries to violently shake Minami-san off.

"You can't! You said this would just be a secret between the two of us!"

"I'm sorry, but I also feel so bad for Futaba…"

"Is that so? It'll be even worse once she's dug up. And I bet you let slip that she didn't hang herself with that rope, too."

"What…?" Hitoe-san's face freezes.

"Futaba was… murdered?"

Surprisingly, this also seems to be news to Minami-san.

"I… I…" Hitoe-san moves her lips, trying to talk but nothing will come out.

"You said Futaba comitted suicide!"

"It was suicide! She just wasn't the one who killed herself."

"You lied?!" Minami-san yells.

Hitoe-san shakes her head hard.

“I didn’t, I didn’t! That’s right! Futaba wanted me to kill her if the rope ended up being too short! I didn’t want to do it, and I was scared, but if I hadn’t then she would have suffocated to death!” Hitoe-san shouts, covering her ears. “…I was so scared, but I was frozen in fear and couldn’t run away… She was struggling so violently, and when I saw her growing weaker as she suffocated…” Hitoe-san slowly lowers her hands from her ears, and averts her eyes. “I needed a lot of strength, but I was scared. She was struggling so much, and I was scared… so scared… so scared… I was so desperate, but Futaba wouldn’t move… The black and blue marks on her throat looked like the wings of a butterfly.”

Hitoe-san’s trembling hands fall to the ground. “After she died, her eyes were still wide open. She was looking at me like she was trying to say, “it’s your turn next,” but I was scared… I felt like I had to die, too, but after watching Futaba, I was so scared… I felt disgusted…”

“Hitoe…” Minami-san calls out to Hitoe-san just as Hitoe starts crying. Minami-san wraps her arms around Hitoe-san.

“So I decided to make it look like she’d hanged herself, and I ran away! But of course, I felt bad for Futaba, and I knew you’d come here sometimes. I thought that you would notice the butterfly shaped marks left on her neck. I wanted to bury Futaba for your sake, but I was still scared that I’d be found out some day!!”

“I… had no idea, all this time… No, rather I should say, I didn’t notice… That you were trying to stay strong…” Minami-san hugs Hitoe-san tight while she cries, then looks up at Isozaki-sensei.

“But this… Is still murder… isn’t it?”

Isozaki-sensei… He can’t deny that. He looks hurt, and slowly nods.

“…What can we do?” She asks with a scratchy voice.

“I don’t know…” Hitoe-san replies in a muffled voice. “I don’t know, but… I also want to know why this happened, why Futaba had to die. Why did I kill Futaba? I don’t get it at all. I loved Futaba, and yet…”

I wonder if she was possessed by some kind of evil spirit? Hatred is not the only reason people kill others. Those who have killed someone for the sake of protecting others definitely exist. However… I don’t think Futaba’s death could fall into any of those categories. Was there any intent to kill or malice in her heart? While watching the two girls crying while clinging to Isozaki-sensei, I notice a white fur ball at the edge of my vision.

“Sakurako-san…”

“What?”

“Uh… Umm please look… by Hector’s feet…”

Hector is digging another hole with his paws and nose covered in mud. Next to the hole where Futaba-san’s corpse is, there’s another white, round lump beside the scapula.

“…A skull?” Sakurako-san also notices immediately. After digging it up, it’s certainly another human skull.

“There are… two… heads…” Sakurako-san says timidly. She nods deeply. “I see. There’s no doubt… protrusion around the eyebrows, and the gentle slope of the forehead, this was a woman. Based off the wear on the teeth, she was between her thirties and forties.”

A tense silence flows between us.

“Another person…?” Isozaki-sensei asks. The two girls quickly shake their heads.

“I don’t know anything! I didn’t bury another person!”

However, they’ve been deceiving us this whole time. While I want to believe what they say, I’m having a hard time doing so. Perhaps Isozaki-sensei feels the same way.

“Is that so… It doesn’t seem like too much time has passed. Perhaps… the bones were intentionally whitened.”

“…Intentionally?”

I have a bad feeling about this.

“The bones were removed. There’s no bleached coating. Perhaps they were extracted, like what I do, and had the flesh taken off. This wasn’t done by microbes or insects.”

“But those… are human bones, aren’t they…?” Minami-san says, not even trying to hide her disgust.

Sakurako-san declares, “there’s no mistaking it, these are human.” Just then, she notices something. “…There’s no butterflies.”

“Butterflies…?”

Sakurako-san shoves the skull into my hands, and quickly turns to look at Futaba-san’s skull again.

“Boy, these bones have something in common… Do you know what it is?”

“Huh?”

I can’t stand holding it anymore, so I place the skull on the ground. I put it next to Futaba-san’s skull. Minami-san and Hitoe-san scream, but Sakurako-san doesn’t pay any attention to them.

“Boy, look here.”

“I- I don’t know! The only things I can think of is that they’re both cracked, or maybe they don’t have enough bones!”

“That’s it.”

I thought there would be no way for me to guess the right answer, but apparently my response was just what she wanted.

“On both of them… Neither one has butterflies.”

“…What do you mean?”

Sakurako-san’s voice trembles. It’s not because of sadness or anger, but more like… Excitement. When she looks at both skulls together, her excitement only seems to grow.

“Ah, geez! You’re so irritating! There’s no sphenoid bone! It’s a bone in the skull that looks like a butterfly, with its wings spread around the nose and eyes. Humans have a butterfly right in the middle of their faces. Neither body has one.” She points at her eyes while she explains, not even stopping to breathe. She grabs Minami-san’s arm roughly. “Tell me now. What kind of man was it that you visited here?”

“He was a mysterious person. He was pretty, like a woman, but also reliable…” The question is answered not by Minami-san, but by Hitoe-san.

“Tell me something more concrete!” Apparently Sakurako-san doesn’t want to hear about things like that.

“Umm… His hair… He had no hair on his body.” This time, Minami-san is the one who speaks. “He normally wore a wig, but the rest of him… He really didn’t have any hair on his body. He was like a hairless caterpillar…”

“Caterpillar…” Sakurako-san repeats.

Hitoe-san’s eyes open wide in surprise.

“What are you saying?! Minami, are you implying Hanabusa-sensei killed someone?! There’s no way!”

“Which one? Which one of you told him about your friend’s corpse? Otherwise they wouldn’t be buried in the same spot. Well, which one? Who squealed?” Sakurako-san breaks up the argument.

However, Minami-san won’t look her in the eye. She can’t answer the question, and averts her gaze.

“Are you the one who told him?”

Rather than words, only a sigh escapes Minami-san’s lips.

“…I felt like I could talk about it, if it was him. He was a strange man. In order to have a special kind of relationship with him, I felt like we needed to share a secret… Even if I didn’t tell him, I felt like he could see through everything… That’s the kind of person he was.” Minami-san says, staring straight at Sakurako-san.

“It really might be Hanabusa-sensei.”

“How can you say that?!”

Minami-san looks at the ground, hugging Hitoe-san tight.

“Hitoe, did you really never notice? He wasn’t… Just some nice person.” Minami-san smiles. It’s like she’s looking down on Hitoe-san’s relationship with this so-called “Hanabusa-sensei.”

“From then… It wasn’t long until he drew the picture of Hitoe. I thought of tearing that picture apart. Hanabusa-sensei noticed that… I thought he would be angry with me, but he wasn’t. If I thought about that, then…” Minami-san takes Hitoe-san’s messy hair and straightens it out while she talks. “But he said that as long as he had Hitoe, he could draw many more pictures… I really wanted to destroy it, but there was no point.”

“No way…”

“Hanabusa-sensei told me to kill Hitoe. I told myself over and over again that it was the right thing to do… Then when he was painting wings on my back… with the sharp painting knife.”

Minami-san hugs her body – but that’s when I notice it. She isn’t just holding herself. That’s not it. She’s crossing her arms over herself to rub her fingers along the butterfly wing-shaped scars on her back.

“The rules of the world exist for those ‘without wings.’ People ‘with wings’ don’t need to be worried about such things. They can just get rid of those troublesome creatures. Things that aren’t beautiful don’t belong in this world… He would often whisper to me that he wanted to taste the blood on my back. So many times, so many times…” Minami-san sighs. It’s a sweet sound, but… I can feel her madness in it.

She suddenly smiles at me.“But after all, I couldn’t kill Hitoe. Since I couldn’t do it… I decided not to meet Hanabusa-sensei again. If I did… I might have someday killed Hitoe for real.” Minami-san says, then turns to Sakurako-san. “Hanabusa-sensei was the kind of person who whispers poison into your ears in the disguise of sweet words. So… He might be the culprit,” Minami-san says.

“Do you know where the painter went?”

“I don’t. I do remember him saying he wanted to visit a warm place…. Somewhere with butterflies.”

Just as she says that, as if to confirm her words, a diana treebrown flutters past us. A butterfly from hell. I watch it disappear into the shadows of the trees, like it’s leading the dead to the afterlife. I feel a chill run down my spine.

Final Part

Isozaki-sensei, Minami-san, and Hitoe-san head to the police. Sakurako-san and I don’t go with them. Besides the fact that it’ll only complicate the story, I don’t think Isozaki-sensei wants one of his students getting involved.

When Sakurako-san and I return to her house, gran is very worried about Minami-san. She hoped Minami-san would come again, but it doesn’t seem likely. After washing Hector and heading to the balcony to dry him off, Sakurako-san listlessly looks through some old files. I want to know what’s in the file, but I can tell she doesn’t want to talk about it, so I pretend not to see while I brush and dry Hector.

“…This is a case that my uncle worked on.”

I stop drying the fluffy Hector when I hear Sakurako-san suddenly speak.

“Huh?”

“An unidentifiable corpse, only the skull has the flesh removed, and the sphenoid bones are missing. The police didn’t care much, but my uncle saw it as a very intentional act. It wasn’t just one time, though.”

“T… Then-“

Sakurako-san slowly nods. I take a breath.

“They say there’s no sociopathic criminals in Japan. Though, that’s just what they say. Even though Japan has over 100 000 people go missing every year, 90% are found. Which means there’s 10% that aren’t found, many of which are dead. In many cases the cause of death is not specified. While I can’t deny that there’s some skillful murderers who walk the street undetected, my uncle’s theory is that there’s a way to hide corpses. A way to use tricks to completely conceal a corpse from the world.”

“Then, you’re saying that artist could have been…?”

Sakurako-san doesn’t answer me. She stares into the distant sky, like she’s looking for something invisible. The big elm tree in front of the old house, wrapped in the thick scent of greenery and silence. The girl who first discovered this place, Futaba Nishizawa, called it a ‘sanctuary.’ Futaba said that it had no special meaning behind it. Perhaps she really believed that there was some kind of magic here.

Minami Tsutsumi is different from Futaba. She is a realistic person, who doesn’t think about such fantastic things. After Futaba was put into the cold soil, she started to believe in those things. Or should I say, she came to wish for it to be true.

If that kind of power really existed, she could have crawled out of the ground and they could have met again. If it was true, it wouldn’t matter if she’d passed away. With nowhere else

to go, Minami decided to visit the house by the elm tree again. Except, nobody was there. She was all alone, except for Futaba's corpse, of course.

It was a sunny day. A warm, summer day, in the middle of the forest. Minami walked through the trees, until she saw someone's figure standing by the elm tree. Her heart almost stopped. She thought about calling out to them. At last… at last I can abandon this filthy body.

However, when she stepped closer, she noticed that it wasn't Futaba. She felt discouraged. After realizing her mistake, she immediately noticed something. It wasn't just any "person" standing there.

"…Hello," the beautiful person said, standing before Minami.

If she hadn't heard that person's voice, she would have mistaken him for a woman. The young man under the elm tree was beautiful. The light streaming onto him through the trees felt like it had a mysterious aura. He looked inhuman, like a magical being from another world. Minami thought that Futaba's soul might have brought this person here.

"Who are you…? What are you doing here?" Minami asked, full of expectations. If this had been a dream, the man surely would have said that he came to pick her up. Yet this was reality, not a dream.

"I'm painting a picture."

"A picture?"

"I'm an artist. I mainly use butterflies as a motif. Here, look."

When he said that, Minami noticed that he was holding a sketchbook and a piece of charcoal. He slowly raised his hand, and pointed to a yellow cutleaf coneflower plant a short ways away.

"Oh…"

There were two butterflies fluttering there, both with wings so white that they looked transparent in the sunlight.

"They're called Parnassius stubbendorfi. They're endemic to Hokkaido. The larvae like to eat the Corydalis ambigua here, so you can see a lot of these butterflies in this season. They're a type of swallowtail butterfly."

"They're pretty…" Minami let out an amazed sigh. The artist gave her a calm smile.

"Come over here." He beckoned her.

When she moved next to him, a shiny, black butterfly swooped down. It slowly fluttered around the two of them, until it eventually landed on Minami's cheek. It almost seemed to kiss her.

"It's an alpine black swallowtail… Do you think it likes you?" The painter said mischievously, then opened his sketchbook.

"…If it's okay, would you like to draw together?"

"Huh?"

"When you draw, you can forget about everything else."

Those words made Minami's heart tremble. She didn't really hate drawing.

"If you go inside, there should be a sketchbook right there."

She headed into the abandoned house to grab it. When she returned, charcoal and sketchbook in hand, the black butterfly was slowly flapping its wings over the ground. It almost

looked like it was trying to suck Futaba's soul out. When she saw that, she felt like somehow she absolutely had to draw it.

"Did you know?"

"Know what?"

"Big, black butterflies like these are called paradise butterflies in some regions."

"Paradise butterflies…?"

"Yes. Black butterflies are said to visit the land of the dead."

Epilogue

After school, I head to Sakurako-san's house like I had promised to. I was recently near my grandpa's house, and he gave me a whole raw salmon as a present, so I brought it with me today. Gran looks delighted when she sees the frozen scallops my mom had me bring.

The day before yesterday, the season seemed to suddenly turn into winter. Every day it keeps snowing, there's already over 50cm. If it keeps up like this, it might end up lingering for a while. Even though my whole body is completely covered in snow, seeing Hector running around in the garden while I shovel the snow is always a treat. When we get back inside, the dining table has been decorated with flowers, and there's a lot of food.

"Wow! This is a huge feast!"

In addition to the lighter foods like salad and canapés, the table also has some kinds of childish foods like hamburger, zangi, fried shrimp, and neapolitan spaghetti. Now that I think about it, gran doesn't cook very much western food. I wonder if she made it just because it's a party… She really seems like a grandma right now.

Speaking of which, my grandma in Mizuyama always makes fried shrimp and omelette rice when I stay there. The western food that grandmothers make always seem like something from the menu at a restaurant. There's also apples cut into rabbits lined up. It's so mismatched that it seems kind of funny and cute.

"Anyway, about this celebration… is it someone's birthday? Ariwara-san's?"

It's too early for Christmas, and it'd be weird to have a year end party. However, gran is too busy to answer my question. When I head into the living room, Sakurako-san is in her usual chair, tilting her wine back and forth. This is the first time I've seen her drink alcohol at her own house. Her pale cheeks are flushed slightly red. It's strangely a bit charming.

"Here's some juice, young master," Gran says, handing me a glass while she set out beer, wine, and tea on the table.

"Can I have wine?"

"Rejected," Sakurako-san immediately replies, pointing to the wine that's left in the bottle. She's always so blunt.

"Darn."

“I’ll give you some delicious grape juice instead. Wine is made from grapes, after all.”

“That sounds good.”

Gran pours a glass full of the purplish-red juice. There’s a clear sourness mixed with the sweetness of the juice. The aroma is nice, too. I want to offer to help, but… most of the preparations seem to be finished, so I decide to wait with my drink. Still, watching gran walking around makes me feel like I can’t just sit here and do nothing.

“Is there anything I can help with?”

“…Actually, there’s something I need help with, and I think you’re the only one who can do it.”

“Of course, whatever you need,” I reply, puffing out my chest. She disappears into the cold hallway.

It’s cold enough that it could probably double as a fridge. She returns with a whole cake, with simple strawberry decorations. She probably made it herself.

“I want you to blow out the candles.”

“Huh? Me?’

“Yes.” Gran nods, looking at the thin candles decorating the top of the cake.

“It would probably be better to ask Sakurako-san.” I look over to her. She turns to face me, glass in hand.

“No, I can’t do it.”

“Huh? But…”

“No matter what you say, I can’t do it.”

She says she can’t, but it seems weird that she wouldn’t be able to just blow out some candles. Anyway, shouldn’t the person they’re throwing this party for blow them out?

“Anyway, what’s this cake for? Who’s this party for?” I ask again. However, nobody answers my question. Sakurako-san ignores me, and gran just looks at me and says, “please, young master.”

There are 20 candles on the cake. Gran lights them all, and asks me to blow them out again.

“Then… I guess I will…”

I don’t know what’s happening, but someone has to blow them out. The melted wax spills onto the icing. I look at gran again. Gran nods, and urges me to blow them out. It can’t be helped. I take a big breath, then blow all the candles out in one go. The scent of melting wax hangs in the air. I rub my nose. Gran looks at the cake and sighs for some reason. She then silently takes a slice and carries it off somewhere.

“Hey, Sakurako-sa-“ The moment I try to ask Sakurako-san what this ceremony is about, my phone rings. It’s from Ariwara-san. When I answer the phone, he tells me he’s finished his work in Sapporo, and he’s heading for Asahikawa.

“It’s Ariwara-san,” I tell Sakurako-san, but she takes my phone.

“While you’re in Sapporo, buy some Mille crepes from Mary Suite as a souvenir. Two of them… no three. And fruit salad and clafoutis,” Sakurako-san says, then hangs up.

“S-Sakurako-san?”

“What?”

“Mille crepes… don’t you have gran’s cake today?”

Mary Suite is a cake shop in Sapporo that Sakurako-san likes. I've heard often that their Mille crepes are delicious, but adding all that on top of the cake we already have seems like way too much.

"That's true, but I want to eat a Mille crepe. Don't worry, you can just eat gran's cake."

"Even if I wanted to- no, no matter how much I want to, it's impossible for one person to eat a whole cake!"

Just then, the doorbell rings. Gran cheerfully answers the door, and a beautiful voice rings out.

"Oh, Shou-chan! Are you here to visit?"

"Shouko-san?"

Shouko-san is the one at the door. We've exchanged emails and phone calls a few times, but we haven't met in person in a while. As I bow my head, she reaches both her arms out towards me.

"Geez! At this rate, you might even grow taller than Nao-chan!"

She squeezes me into a hug. She seems like she's in a good mood. She heads off to hug Sakurako-san with just as much force. Behind her is Hector, wagging his tail and looking like he's saying, "do I get one next?"

"Good thing Shou-chan is here, I brought shinkoyaki and sushi!" Shouko-san says with a big grin. Behind her, I can see gran setting out dishes. There's delicious looking sushi laid out in rows, and two shinkoyaki… It's basically a whole chicken. "And here's your favourite, Saachan! Pumpkin tarts!" She says, opening up a box full of white cakes.

"Tarts…?" As I expected, Sakurako-san furrows her brow.

"Actually, isn't this a lot of food?"

I look at the whole table with a bitter smile. This is obviously way too much for five people. Not to mention that Ariwara-san is buying more cakes.

"…Boy, your phone," Sakurako-san says to me with a sigh.

"This is why you shouldn't ask for all that."

When I try to call Ariwara-san, she grabs my arm.

"No, not him. Call Utsumi. He should be off duty right now."

"Huh?"

"Tell him to bring the twins, and that lost child."

"You mean his sister's twins and Ii-chan?"

"That's right. Also, Isozaki likes sweets. If possible, invite Yuriko as well."

Gran looks delighted as I type away on my phone.

"In that case, this isn't nearly enough food! I can use the salmon we got from the young master to make salmon zangi, and chanchan yaki. Fried scallops sound good, too!" Gran happily disappears into the kitchen, finally getting to use all her cooking abilities for the first time in a while.

Shouko-san follows her to make her special punch. Fortunately, I can get in contact with everyone. In just one hour, the Kujo residence will be packed. Sakurako-san sits in her chair, gazing out at the snowy garden.

"Sakurako-san?" I call out to her.

She might still be drunk. I give up and turn to head to the kitchen, but she suddenly grabs my wrist.

“I’m listening.”

“What… I thought you got drunk and fell asleep.”

“I wouldn’t get drunk from just that. I have a strong liver.”

“Every drunk person says that.”

Even her cheeks and ears are red. She pouts. It’s the same childish gesture as always, but her movements clearly show that she’s drunk. When she turns her head, I can see the sweat dripping down her throat and collarbone. It makes me start to feel flustered. Since she’s still holding my wrist, she can probably feel my heart racing.

“…I’d like to ask you one question.”

“What is it?”

“That cake… There were 20 candles.” For a moment, there’s nothing but silence. “What were you celebrating today? Ariwara-san and everyone came over, so it must have been something special, right?”

“…That has nothing to do with you. Gran is the one who said she wanted to celebrate it. I didn’t.” She turns to look away- actually, that isn’t quite right. She’s looking at the picture frame on top of the fireplace.

“Is it… That person’s birthday? Is he your little brother or something?” I ask, timidly.

Sakurako-san’s grip tightens around my hand. Her hand is trembling slightly. It’s starting to hurt.

“Um… I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have…”

She turns away, so I can’t see her expression. But… But I think she might be crying. I suddenly feel like I’ve done something awful, and pull my hand away from hers. She turns to face me… Fortunately, she isn’t crying. However, she’s frighteningly expressionless.

“Well then… I’m going to go help in the kitchen.” I turn around to escape from this awkward atmosphere.

“-Now.”

“Huh?”

Sakurako-san lets out a tiny voice. “I don’t want to talk right now.”

“Then… Does that mean you’ll tell me about it someday?”

She doesn’t respond to those words. At least I wasn’t scolded. I nod before leaving for the kitchen.

The party is a lot of fun, especially for gran, who is a hit with the children. I’m happy, too. At the end of the day, Kougami took a commemorative photo with everyone. I’ll always keep my copy of the picture in my wallet, even after I become an adult. However, that’s a story for another time.